

CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE NAMASUDRA:
SYMBOLISM AND RESISTANCE IN RITUALS AND SONGS
IN
POST-PARTITION ERA

By

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DECLARATION

I, Jyoti Biswas, Research Scholar in the Department of English Studies declare that the work embodied in this M. Phil Dissertation entitled **“Cultural Heritage of the Namasudra: Symbolism and Resistance in Rituals and Songs in Post - Partition Era”** is a result of mine own bona fide work carried out with mine personal effort and submitted by me under the supervision of Dr. A. Selvam, Head, Department of English Studies at Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvavur. The Contents of the dissertation have not formed the basis for the award of any Degree/Diploma/Fellowship/Titles in this University or any other University or similar institutions of higher learning.

I declare that I have faithfully acknowledged and given credit and referred to the researchers wherever their works have been cited in the body of the dissertation. I further declare that I have not willfully copied some other's data/work/results etc. reported in the journals, magazines, books, reports, dissertations, theses, internet etc. and claimed as my own work.

Date: 18-11-2020

Signature of the Candidate

Place: CUTN

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **“Cultural Heritage of the Namasudra: Symbolism and Resistance in Rituals and Songs in Post – Partition Era”** is a bona fide record of research work done by Mr. Jyoti Biswas, Research Scholar, Department of English Studies, Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvavur, under my guidance and that this thesis has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other similar title to the candidate.

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Abstract

In the Postmodern worldview, the question of cultural representation of marginal people through the means of their literature, music, cinema, sports has become a prime focus in Cultural studies. India, a Third World country represents her cultural heritage beginning with the ruins of Indus civilization, Vedic culture, and Buddhism. But being an immensely diverse country with thousands of castes, tribes as well as many religions, one can trace its multiple circles each representing the cultural heritage of its respective caste and tribe quite independently. Putting aside dominant religious identity-based culture, such as Hindu or Muslim, the present research focuses on the cultural aspects of Namasudra, an agrarian caste of West Bengal. If Santals represents their tribal culture through songs, dance, and orality, Chandal-turned-Namasudras can represent their agrarian, ethnic culture through folk rituals and songs too. In question of representation, it seems quite universally cognitive that a dominant caste or religion cannot represent a marginalized in any way. If we think of the forms of cultural representation of marginalized groups of people across the world, it begins with their folk culture. The present research is a maiden attempt to examine the century-old rituals and songs that Namasudras have been celebrating. The fieldwork is conducted in some densely populated Namasudra villages in Nadia district, West Bengal and live performances of their rituals and songs have been recorded therein. The present research evaluates the elements of their culture, such as selected folk rituals, ritualistic practices of Matua religion, and *Chetana Sangeet* and then justifies two specific themes therein: symbolism and resistance. The entire dissertation has been divided into four chapters. First chapter contextualizes heritage and culture in the life of Namasudras; the second and third chapter examines the selected rituals and songs and evaluates the theme of symbolism and resistance therein respectively; and the last chapter summarizes the findings of entire research.

Chapter One

Introduction: Culture, Heritage and Emergence

Culture and Heritage

Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), the father of Social Anthropology gives one of the most enduring definitions of culture in his *Primitive Culture* (1871): “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1). Tylor shows two movements in the study of human evaluation: progression-theory and degradation-theory. According to Tylor, the different stages of human civilization follows the progression-theory (34); its journey from primitive to civilized is progressive that includes along with its historic progression its customs, arts, and other cultural artifacts to be transmitted from one generation down to another (63). Heritage in this sense does not involve only the past. Although the humming of the ancestors keeps a strong resonance to the present generations, heritage gives birth the present that subsequently moves on to creating a future. “Heritage is part of our expressive life that tells us where we came from by preserving and presenting voices from the past, grounding us in the linkages of family, community, ethnicity, and nationality, giving us our creative vocabulary” (Ivey 55). This ‘creative vocabulary’ finds in oral tradition its earliest medium of expression. It includes folk belief, rituals and customs, music and dance and other mediums of cultural expressions weaving the narrative of their century-old heritage. “Cultural heritage requires memory. It is not enough for things and monuments to exist on a landscape: in order to be cultural heritage they must be remembered and claimed as patrimony, even if their

original meaning is lost or poorly understood” (Silverman and Ruggles 12). The present generations of any race, tribe, and caste therefore seem to be the bearer of this collective memory in their own time and space. We cannot overlook the change taking place in the whole way of living of the present generations with the passing away of time, but despite some modifications and alterations that might take place in the components of their orality, it is abundantly found in the life of the present generations in its original forms.

Cultural heritage is the product of the collective endeavor of the community members and in this sense a concrete political consciousness is imminent (Assche 17). More than that, land, language and lineage (three L) always serve as the essential bedrock of any ethnic group’s cultural identity (Gilbert 31-34). Human race has followed its evaluation from prehistoric time onwards and throughout this evaluation the cultural practices of their ancestors got transmitted down to successive generations with or without modification. “An important element in ethnic ideologies is the notion of historical continuity of the group” (Ericson 267). In this argumentation, the existence of a large number of ethnic people itself irrespective of its geographical location is the preliminary records of its heritage. Fredrik Barth argues that “The existence of the ethnic group... has to be affirmed socially and ideologically through the general recognition, among its members and outsiders, that it is culturally distinctive” (Ericson 263). To gain knowledge about the assets of heritage that an ethnic group or community inherits from its ancestors, two kinds of it are to be found: tangible and intangible. Any monument or old manuscript is its tangible asset, whereas oral songs or ritualistic practices its intangible asset. But there is no heritage possible without considering the population of any tribe, caste, and community and their composite role in making both tangible and intangible assets sustainable

along the change of time and place. The research on Namasudras' cultural heritage therefore calls for a research on who are this group of people.

The concerned people of this research were referred to as Chandal¹ in the first census conducted in 1872 (Biswas 273). Before the appropriation of the concept of cultural heritage in the life of Namasudras to be done, a brief account has to be noted down about the concerned people. The following is a brief account of who the Chandals were. The account derives its informative stuffs from two sources: Brahminical literature and the ethnographic and anthropological research of ICS officers and other European scholars in British India. Manusmriti dictates: "Chandals and Svapacas, however, must live outside the village and they should be made Apapratras. Their property consists of dogs and donkeys; their garments are the clothes of the dead; they eat in broken vessels; their ornaments are of iron; and they constantly roam about" (Olivelle 210). Dividing the entire Hindu society into fourfold, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra, the *Manusmriti* being the most fundamental Law book of Brahminism, goes beyond a Sudra and drags many indigenous non-Hindu groups: "... below the Sudra is Ati-Shudra or the untouchable. This order of precedence among classes is not merely conventional. It is spiritual, moral and legal. There is no spare of life which is not regulated by this principle of graded inequality" (Ambedkar 107). According to Dr. Ambedkar, non-Hindu groups of people have been demonized and criminalized in the entire Hindu cultural narrative

¹ The present researcher uses Chandal-turned-Namasudra a combined nomenclature throughout his thesis to refer to the concerned people officially known as Namasudra in the Scheduled Caste list in The Constitution of India. The reason behind it is that, according to scholars of this community, Namasudra came to be a new name for their community, a verbal trick as a part of Brahminical conspiracy. Chandals did not form any part in the four-fold caste structure as sanctioned in Hindu scriptures. They were a large group of indigenous people living in the lower Gangetic plain who had settled there long before the Aryan Invasion taken place around the middle of the second millennium B.C. But the official norm cannot be disobeyed. Therefore, they are referred to as Chandal-turned-Namasudra. Although it is a long nomenclature, it bears its indigenous status in it. Swapan Kumar Biswas puts forward his thoughts that Chandals are autochthons of Indian subcontinent. See Biswas, S. K. *Untouchable Chandals of India: A Democratic Movement*. New Delhi, Gyan Publishing, 2013.

(108). Chandals being not a part of fourfold structure have been demonized and criminalized in Brahminical literature. But the ICS officers and other European scholars put some different account about the subject in their ethnographic and anthropological documentations that they had carried out in the British period. What they saw, what they were told by native people, and what they studied different tribes and castes from anthropological, ethnographic, and anthropometric discourse remained the base of their portrayal of the Indian people that appears to be more scientifically documented than unscientific, biased, and discriminatory mythical narrative found in Brahminical sources. F. J. Monahan writes: "... at the time of Alexander's invasion, the most important power in Northern India was that of two nations, Prasii and Gangarides, who inhabited the country along the lower Ganges, now comprised in the provinces of Bihar and Bengal" (15). James Wise writes: "Bengal was never properly an Aryan country, and the Aryans who did reside within its border always held an uncertain footing among the aboriginal tribes" (5). Imperial Gazetteer of India records: "The east of the Bhagirathi and south of Pundra lay Banga or Samatata. Its people are described in the *Raghubansa* as possessing boats, and they are clearly the ancestors of the Chandals, who at the present day inhabit this part of the country" (210). Risley keeps an anthropological account of Chandals and unlike the racist Brahminical interpretation he tries to go deeper into the soil of authenticity: "... it is plausible conjecture that they may have been, like Sudra, the tribal name of the aboriginal races who Aryans found in possession of the soil" (183). He writes: "It may perhaps be inferred from the present geographical position of the Chandals that they... may have offered a specially stubborn resistance to the Aryan advances" (185). C. J. O'Donnell echoes Risley by saying "it is certain that Chandal was the active and successful enemy of the Aryan invader."² Therefore, it is to be

² Census of India, 1891. The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories, vol. viii, The Report by C. J. O'Donnell, ICS, Bengal.

understood that unlike Brahminical literature the ethnographic, anthropological, and historical documentations of European scholars found them as a group of indigenous people inhabiting in the lower Gangetic plain long before the Aryan invasion and continuously resisting the process of Aryanization or Hinduization or better known as Brahminization in later periods.

A new phenomenon also provoked the ICS officers to keep its record, that is, a mass movement aimed at changing the Chandal name in the second half of nineteenth century. Since “the Chandals have been despised by the upper class Hindus and a Brahman thought himself defiled by even treading the shadow cast by the body of a Chandal”³, the demand of changing the caste name was first reported in the next census survey in 1881 (Biswas 23). W. Macpherson, the Assistant Commissioner of Sylet district (now in Bangladesh) circulated a decree regarding the change of name: “That Namasudra must always be written and not Chang or Chandal for all persons of the said caste.”⁴ L. S. S. O’Malley, the Gazetteer of Jessore district (now in Bangladesh) wrote in his report: “The Chandals of Bengal invariably call themselves Namasudra.”⁵ In 1901 census, the caste name “Namasudra (Chandal)” was registered and in 1911 census “Chandal was dropped.”⁶

The concerned people known as Namasudra in the Scheduled Caste list of government of West Bengal⁷ emerged as a consolidated community only in the second half of nineteenth century in the colonial period. The concept of a consolidated community has properly been theorized around the second half of twentieth century in the theory of Communitarianism that popularizes the word ‘community’ the central idea of which is ‘inclusive communities’ that is

³ W. W. Hunter. Statistical Account of Bengal. Vol. v, London, 1875, p. 285.

⁴ Quoted in Biswas, Sipra. Aneswan: Bangali Somajer Swarup. Vol. 1, Kolkata, Adol Badol, 1996, p. 274.

⁵ L. S. S. O’Malley, I. C. S. The Gazetteer of Jessore District. Calcutta, 1908.

⁶ Resolution No. 3435 dated 14 July, 1913 General Dept.: Govt. Bengal. (under the signature of H. F. Samman. Secretary.)

⁷ <https://www.socialjustice.nic.in/writersddata/UploadFile/Scan-00206360523010555616230.jpg>.

based on three interrelated criteria, namely ‘cooperative enquiry’, ‘mutual responsibility’ and ‘citizen participation’ (Tam vii). Following the above argument, Chandal-turned-Namasudras can be called an ‘inclusive community.’ They were known as Chandals before; they speak Bangla (its specific dialect) as their common language in later periods; live in the eastern part of the subcontinent (around the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta in Bangladesh and in Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Tripura) and in Andaman and Nicobar Islands; but their native settlement was in East Bengal before the partition of British India into India and Pakistan; their traditional livelihood includes cultivation, fishing, pottery, carpentry and other sorts of manual work; they emerged as a unified group of people in the colonial period⁸ under the leadership of Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur. Besides, the word ‘Post-Partition’⁹ in the research topic demands especial discussion since it is inseparably related to the fate of this community too.

Based on the study of both Brahminical literature as well as the colonial scholarship, the scholars of this community have drawn an outline of their identity from different perspectives. Although there are different opinions, we can decode an intellectual effort to establish an independent scholarship free from Brahminical interpretation of demonization and criminalization. Atul Krishna Biswas observes: “The Namasudra is an exclusively Bengali caste. Till 1911, he was called the Chandal who is, according to scriptures, a progeny of illegitimate

⁸ Although there are a few Chandals outside Bengal, the Chandals of Bengal sought to change their name. But Dr. Ambedkar shows that even after the change of caste name, their socio-economic conditions have not been improved much. See *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*. Vol. 3, p. 37. Manoranjan Byapari, an eminent dalit writer also shares the same opinion. See Byapari, Manoranjan. *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*. Translated by Sipra Mukherjee, New Delhi, Sage, 2018.

⁹ There were few people of the same community living in the Western part of undivided Bengal. That means majority of them have had their native land in East Bengal that became East Pakistan after 1947 and Bangladesh after 1971. If Harichand and his son Guruchand initiated their religious and social movements in Orakandi, East Bengal, it is presumed that not every one of the same got influenced by it at the initial period. It started from one specific location and spread out gradually to other places thereafter. But few of them living in the Western part of undivided Bengal perhaps remained outside of this movement, but got assimilated later, more specifically after the Partition when the East Bengali members migrated to the West Bengal. Another thing to be mentioned, neither all Namasudras are followers of Matuaism, nor all of them migrated to India after 1947 and 1971. The people studied in my fieldwork migrated to West Bengal in different times, more intensely after 1971.

liaisons between Brahman female and a Sudra male” (3). The origin of the compound noun ‘Namah+ Sudra’ is still a matter of debate among scholars. Sudra is a derogatory neologism in entire Hindu culture the absence of which is unthinkable in the presumed narrative of Brahminical superiority (Olivelle 91); but ‘Namah’ might have a reverential adjective popularized to make their affiliation with Aryanization (Risley 185).

The first outline made by the native scholars in their Bangla and a few English writings is mythical. This hypothesis relates a tale believed to be found in certain Sanskrit texts. Many Brahmins helped enthusiastic Chandal fellows to get to know about one particular story. It tells a story about one ancient Brahmin sage named Namas and how he missed the proper time of getting ordained in the *Upanayana*¹⁰ the absence of which made him and his descendents fallen Brahmins (Roy 110-116). The second outline is anthropological hypothesis including its major branches. Sunil Kumar Roy (b. 1940) demonstrates that the concerned people addressed as Namasudra are primarily the Namo,¹¹ name of a primitive group of people sharing their ancestral lineage with the inhabitants of The Great Namaland of Namibia, Botswana and certain parts of South Africa. They migrated from their native settlement thousands of years ago and got dispersed throughout the North. One group crossed the Red Sea; had taken a long march across the Arabian Desert; reached to India through North-West and founded the Indus Valley; later on with the decline of the Valley because of climate change, the same Namo group of people settled

¹⁰ *Upanayana* is a traditional ceremony observed in upper caste families (according to Manusmriti families of Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya castes). The boys of those families (Manusmriti excludes girls) are awarded with a set of threads to be put on around the upper part of their body. This thread is recognized as the most prestigious thing they possess because the threads which are very sacred make them higher than a Sudra who according to Manusmriti cannot claim to have it. In the very day of this celebration it is announced that he is *dwija* or ‘twice-born.’ In the context of this myth the sage Namas failed to claim the *Upanayana*, hence couldn’t become higher than a Sudra. The absence of *Upanayana* gave him and his fellow descendents the low status.

¹¹ Sunil Kumar Roy collected available archeological and anthropological records to claim it in his Bangla book *Itihase Namo Jati* (Namo Race in History) published in 2019. This book has gained a wider readership among Namasudra and other dalitbahujan readers and scholars. The present researcher tries to bring together different opinions regarding the genesis and development of the concerned people.

in the alluvial land of Gangetic delta (Roy 19-39; Roy 35-41). Swapan Kumar Biswas (b. 1947) puts forward his arguments to establish the ‘theory of Chandalhood.’ According to him, Chandals¹² were the non-Aryans having a glorious civilization and culture in ancient India. “The ethnic group called Chandal... appears to be one of the strong non-Aryan autochthon groups who had nothing to do with Brahman or Hinduism... They belonged to a pure tribal group, race, or a nation” (58). The people known as Namasudra are successors of the great Chandals. It is only in the Sena dynasty¹³ that ‘Chandal’ had been attributed with contemptuous and derogatory meaning in Bangla usage. The Chandals sought to replace it by another name ‘Namasudra’ in the second half of nineteenth century, which according to Swapan Kumar Biswas is a homophonic connotation of ‘Nabasudra’ (New Sudra). Chandals are non-Aryan hence they do not form any of the four castes of Aryan society. But replacement of Chandal with Namasudra seems to be a triumph of Brahminical hegemony in the sense that they managed to bring a non-Aryan ethnic group within the fourfold caste system with this new neologism (Biswas 53-59). The next anthropological hypothesis seeks the genesis of the concerned people by reviving the concept of ‘Bango’. Showing no enthusiasm to ‘Namo’ or ‘Namasudra’, it focuses on the name of geographical location to be the source of the people. Since the language is known as Bangla, the land Bengal, the bay as Bay of Bengal and references of this province as Bango in Sanskrit texts,

¹² Swapan Kumar Biswas, a noted scholar has done some authentic works to establish his ‘Theory of Chandalhood’ especially in two important books. They are *Autochthon of India and Aryan Invasion* (1995) and *Untouchable Chandals of India: A Democratic Movement* (2013). In both of them, he shows with sufficient records drawn from Sanskrit texts primarily that two groups of races remain central of discussion: Aryan and non-Aryan or Vedic and non-Vedic. The frequent references of Chandals being savage and criminal gives rise to the enquiry: who actually they are. Biswas comes up with his theory that Chandals are one of the autochthons of this land. The people known as Namasudra were known as Chandals as the records show. It leads him to establish the validity of his claim that Namasudras belong to the indigenous groups of people.

¹³ After the fall of Pala dynasty (750 to mid-11th century), Sena dynasty ruled Bengal (1070-1202 AD). They were staunch follower of Brahminical scriptures. The rise of caste system emerged during this time. Ballal Sen is credited with founding the Koulinya system that raised the superiority of Brahmans. It is recorded in copper plates that the people who followed Buddhism in the previous Pala Dynasty were targeted and killed. Buddhists were hated and condemned. The rise of Brahminical hegemony seems to be the beginning of the plight and misery of those Buddhists who later on either got converted to Islam or fled to some other places. See Majumder, R. C. *Ancient India*. New Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, 1977.

Upendranath Biswas did an extensive survey regarding the origin of Bango people in his *Bango: A Group of Indigenous People*¹⁴ (2004). His claim is that the indigenous inhabitants of the Gangetic delta were known as Bango. The rulers of Gangarides¹⁵ were Bango; Pala rulers¹⁶ were Bango; he argues that the community known as Namasudra is the descendents of the ancestral Bango; and despite their new caste name they are indigenous, not a part of the four-fold caste system (55-65). Dr. Oneil Biswas (1916-2004), an eminent scholar and historian of this community supported this view in his *The Namah-Sudra: Origin and Development* (2004).

Emergence

Their emergence as a strong, unified, rebellious community is a great social and political phenomenon in the nineteenth century history of Bengal and India at large. The entire emergence is better known as the ‘Namasudra Movement or Matua Andolon.’ But the genesis, mechanism, and activism of this movement have been discussed as an ideological base of the resistance in their cultural utterances in the third chapter. Now concept of Post-Partition and their emergence in contemporary West Bengal require a brief discussion. The Partition of British India in 1947 into India and Pakistan is the biggest calamity in the modern South Asian History¹⁷. It

¹⁴ This book has been translated into Bangla by Gyan Prakash Mandal. The citation has been taken from the translated text and then translated them into English. *Guruchand Charit* states that the present Chandal-turned Namasudra generations are the successors of the Buddhists of Pala dynasty. Therefore a link can be decoded between Biswas’s theory of Bango who were the Pala rulers to that of latter’s commentary on the Buddhist lineage of the concerned people.

¹⁵ See page number 12.

¹⁶ After the fall of Gouda Kingdom (late 6th to early 7th CE) whose great ruler was Shashanka (590 CE to 625 CE), political and administrative situations turned into a chaos in Bengal. The native people of Bengal elected one Gopal as their king in c. 755 CE. Pala dynasty ruled Bengal and Bihar from 755 CE till 11th CE. Palas were Buddhists, patronized Prakrit and popularized Buddhism in far-off land. This period is known as the ‘Golden Period Bengal.’ See Bagchi, Jhunu. *The History and Culture of the Palas of Bengal and Bihar*. New Delhi. Abhinav Publications, 1993.

¹⁷ Interested readers can read the following books to get a Dalit critique of the Partition of India, Biswas, Manosanta. *Caste Dynamics in India: Social Mobility and Cultural Otherness of the Namasudra of Bengal*. Kolkata, Columbia International, 2018. For general readings, read Chatterji, J. *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1994. For Postcolonial reading, read Svenson, Ted. *Production of Postcolonial India and Pakistan*. London and New York, Routledge, 2013.

had a far-reaching impact upon millions living in the subcontinent. There has always been a debate regarding who is to be held responsible for dividing the one land mass into two and putting the life of millions in unimaginable horror and immeasurable loss of human resources. Although the debate continues, what is striking more is that the heaviest blow hurled upon the well-organized, unified sections of the Namasudras living in the East Bengal. The Post-Partition era has seen the exodus of millions of non-Muslims crossing the newly-curved East Pakistani border and pouring into different provinces in India. If not all of them, most of the East Bengali Chandal-turned-Namasudras left their native land behind and settled in different Indian provinces, chiefly West Bengal that has been carved out from erstwhile East Bengal to form a Hindu-majority state under Indian government. Dr. Manosanta Biswas shows that the upper caste politicians of Bengal separated Hindu majority provinces of undivided Bengal in a way so that Namasudra-populated districts¹⁸ would remain disconnected from West Bengal that emerged as the Hindu majority province dominated by Bengali upper castes (262-264). He points out that the upper castes that had a political awareness and social privilege migrated to West Bengal as early as possible; and from 1947 to 1950 the migrated people were upper castes (265). On the contrary, Chandal-turned-Namasudras who were mostly farmers, fishers, and other sorts of menial workers found it difficult to terminate their means of earning at once and migrate to India. Consequently “The exodus of Namasudras continued for many economic reasons and their population increased from 11.1 percent to 16.1 percent” (Biswas 298). But Bangla Dalit autobiographies recorded the lived experiences that tell us innumerable incident of sexual violence upon non-Muslim women by local Muslims at that particular time in both respective

¹⁸ Jessore, Khulna, Barishal and Faridpur were Namasudra-majority districts in East Bengal prior to the Partition in 1947.

localities and refugee camps. The lived experiences of Chandal-turned-Namasudras as Dalit refugees get faithfully reflected in Bangla Dalit autobiographies.¹⁹

The settlement of migrated Chandal-turned-Namasudras in West Bengal since 1947 and more intensely after 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War changed the demography of the state. Their population figure in 2011 census report is 35,04,642,²⁰ but popular opinion varies. Despite their uprooted life, they have emerged and become well-organized in the Post-Partition era under the guidance of Matua Mahasangha,²¹ and Organizations like Namasudra Bikash Parishad (Namasudra Development Association). Matua Mahasangha has emerged as the central organization of the followers of Harichand and Guruchand at Thakur Nagar, North 24 Pargana, West Bengal (Biswas 308). In recent political scenario of West Bengal, Chandal-turned-Namasudra population has become a crucial factor. Since 2011 Legislative Assembly election, they emerged as a political vote-bank to upper caste politics. The visit of Chief Minister of West Bengal and the Prime Minister of India to Thakur Nagar before 2019 Lok Sabha election is perhaps the biggest sign of their emergence despite being displaced from their native land.²² This has given rise to discussions about the socio-political visibility of the subject in contemporary West Bengal. With their emergence in West Bengal, interest has grown among researchers to work upon the various aspects of their community life and history. The first fundamental

¹⁹ There are a handful number of autobiographies written by Dalit writers of Bengal. Three of them are by three Namasudra writers each: *Amar Bhubane Ami Benche Thaki* (2013) by Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Itibritte Chandali Jibon* (2014) by Manoranjan Byapari; and *Sikor Chhera Jibon* (2018) by Jatin Bala.

²⁰ <https://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/SC.html>.

²¹ Before the Partition Orakandi in Faridpur district was the head quarter of entire religious and social reformist movement. After Partition Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, grandson of Guruchand Thakur settled in West Bengal and around 1960s established a centre at Thakur Nagar, North 24 Pargana, West Bengal. This place emerged as the Indian Orakandi to millions of Matuas. This place is known as Thakur Nagar Thakurbari. The Indian headquarter of Matua Mahasangha is located here.

²² On 2nd February, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Thakurnagar and met Binapani Devi who has served as the great matriarch of All India Matua Mahasangha, the apex regulatory body of Matua religion in India that has been founded by her husband Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. See note 21. Since 2011, Thakurnagar Thakurbari has become a hotcake in the political affairs in this sense that upper caste politicians want to woo Thakurbari to get the support of the millions of Matua followers in elections.

research on Chandals have been done by two great Europeans: British civil surgeon Dr. James Fawns Norton Wise (1835-1886) in his *Notes on the Races, Castes, and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (1883) and great British ethnographer and colonial administrator Sir Herbert Hope Risley (1851-1911) in his *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Volume 1: Ethnographic Glossary* (1891). Any research pursuit on Chandal-turned-Namasudra's social, political, and religio-cultural topics has to acknowledge the fundamental contribution of Dr. Wise and Sir Risley. The present researcher pays his tribute and reverence to these two great Europeans who documented the entire life of Chandals without any racist or casteist bias and brought out an authentic portrayal of their life, society, and culture. Some research works have already been done on the historical and literary aspects of Namasudra movement and on Matua religion in general such as *Matua Andolon O Dalit Jagoron* (2002) by Dr Nandadulal Mohanta, *Matua Sahitya Parikroma* (1999) by Dr Birat Bairagya, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947* (2011) by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Dynamics in India: Social Mobility and Cultural Otherness of the Namasudra of Bengal* (2018) by Manoshanta Biswas. Among all these research work Dr. Birat Bairagya's research deserves special mention. Although not a research on folk rituals and folk songs that the present research does, it records many other traditional songs accompanied with respective dance forms, better known as *Palagan*²³ in Bangla. One of the recorded *Palagans* is *Astok*²⁴. Other researches and publications have dealt with social, religious and political dimensions more. Although very short, but Risley's account of *Bastu* eritual is a path-breaking research that has been elaborated in the second chapter. No research

²³ It is a musical drama dealing with mythical stories. But it does not reserve the performance within Hindu mythology, rather any caste or tribe can adopt it and set the performance based on their own mythology.

²⁴ It is a musical dance drama quite popular among Namasudras. It is performed based on the life of Krishna and Radha; but Namasudras perform Ashtok based on the life of Harichand and Guruchand too.

work has been done on the folk rituals extensively, such as *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra* and folk songs sung along with these rituals.

Rituals like *Garshi*, *Bastu* and *Hanchra* are representative of their century-old folk culture and they bear the hallmark of indigenous root of their intangible cultural asset through celebrating them in Post-Partition era. In other words, it is by studying the rituals and songs one can go deeper into the genesis of their agrarian life, ethnic values and rich oral tradition. In the contemporary time they have emerged as one of the most unified communities in West Bengal. Their lived experiences in the entire trajectory of Partition made them aware of what Satan told his fellow fallen Angels “United we stand, divided we fall.” Bagula in the district of Nadia, West Bengal is a Chandal-turned-Namasudra populated locality. The local residents have founded *Bangiya Hari-Guruchand Ambedkar Chetana Mancha*,²⁵ a multi-purpose charitable trust in 2011 to promote the cultural heritage of their own community as well as of other Dalit-bahujan communities of Bengal. Mr. Pabitra Biswas, an honorary member of the organization has invented and popularized a new genre of modern musical performance called *Chetana Sangeet* (Song of Conscience). With the theme of resistance as its major concern, *Chetana Sangeet* has become quite popular among the Dalit-bahujan²⁶ audience in West Bengal. No work has been done on the genesis and application of this specific song-making culture as well.

²⁵ The name of the organization includes three great personalities: Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

²⁶ Prof. Kancha Ilaiah, former professor of Political Science, Osmania University, Hyderabad is an eminent Ambedkarite scholar and activist. He has given this word a wider currency in his famous book *Why I Am Not A Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (1996). He includes SCs, STs, and OBCs by this name. The present researcher puts a hyphen between two words to mark the distinction of each word from another. Dalit, originally derived from Sanskrit meaning ‘crushed’ or ‘oppressed’ was recorded first in a Marathi-English dictionary by J. J. Molesworth, an army officer of the East India Company and got wider currency first in Marathi vernacular with the rise of Dalit Panther movement in 1970s. Bahujan on the other is found in many Pali texts meaning ‘the many’ or ‘the majority’ or ‘the mass.’ The rise of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under the leadership of Kanshiram in 1980s gave this word a political character, and makes a clear ‘85 per cent majority bahujan versus 15 per cent minority upper castes’, thus validating the power of the mass who are hard worker,

While crossing the Indo-Pakistan or Indo-Bangladesh border since 1947 and migrating to a new country, millions of Chandal-turned-Namasudras carried along with them the century-old rituals and songs that they inherited from their ancestors. They might be known as either Chandal or Namo or Bango, but here we have a rich cultural heritage in rituals and songs of a large ethnic community of Bengal.

Theoretical Framework

The primary texts in the present research constitute the recordings of live performance of selected rituals and songs existing among Chandal-turned-Namasudras and a series of interviews of respected villagers, the old generation in particular of this community and some established scholars and singers on the subject. The rituals and songs are recorded in the research fieldwork conducted by the researcher in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th week of December, 2019 in selected villages at Garapota and Bagula, two densely Namasudra populated localities in Nadia district of West Bengal. The first three rituals are: *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra*. They fall in the category of folk ritual carrying a distinct oral tradition. Next inclusion is ritualistic practices related to Matua religion; and the last is *Chetana Sangeet* (Song of Conscience). A documentary running for two hours twenty-eight minutes and fifteen seconds has been made out of the raw video clippings and submitted to the department as the result of research fieldwork. The songs sung in respective rituals have been transcribed into standard Bangla first and translated them into English

intelligent, productive; in other words the 85 per cent population is the bahun population who have been oppressed and dominated in an artificially constructed Hindu religious identity over centuries. Namasudra community of West Bengal being hard worker, intelligent and productive belongs to the bahun society. They are the majority, therefore the mainstream. Based on this argument the present researcher has used the combined word 'dalit-bahun' to contextualize Namasudras in the political culture of West Bengal in his present research. For further study on dalit-bahun empowerment see Gurusamy, S. *Dalit Empowerment in India*. New Delhi, MJP Publisher, 2013; Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Caste in North India*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2003.

thereafter by the researcher himself. The secondary materials in the research include English and Bangla books on social and political aspects of Namasudra community as well as books on the Dalit-bahujan emergence in India and Bengal in general. In this case focus is given to the important research works done in different disciplines such as history, folklore, social anthropology and religion by the established scholars born in this community. Online archives such as South Asia Digital Library, Internet Archive, and JSTOR have been used to get access to old records, census reports, writings of ICS officers of British government in India and other scholarly writings of different disciplines.

The present research has followed the following theoretical framework for studying the primary texts and evaluating the chosen themes therein: the emergence of Postmodernist worldview and the decline of ‘grand narratives’; the initiation of Cultural studies as a distinct academic discipline and the shift of attention from elite or dominant Culture to marginalized cultures in academic establishment; the rise of Dalit studies in India as a consequence of emergence of ‘small narratives’ in Postmodern worldview; the place of folk elements, such as folk rituals, folk songs, folk beliefs, folktales in evaluating marginalized peoples’ (whether tribe or caste) independently-built cultural heritage; the selected rituals and songs of Chandal-turned-Namasudra caste in West Bengal and an evaluation of symbolist narrative and resistant utterance therein; and finally the justification of the present thesis, that is, *the re-assertion and re-appropriation of a Dalit-bahujan community’s independently-built cultural heritage in the Post-Partition era*.

Postmodernism is a wider philosophical orientation the base of which is to grow and nourish a skeptical, cynical, and ironical attitude to any authoritarian, universal value of culture. It is a philosophical movement prioritizing “scepticism about authority, received wisdom,

cultural and political norms” (Sim 3). The authoritarian and universal values help grow many grand narratives or metanarratives that are primarily totalizing, encompassing cultural narratives that hold a strong sway over the general notion of human progress and human emancipation. Grand narratives do uphold specific view that “history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate us, and that all knowledge has a secret unity”, that it gives “cultural practices some form of legitimation or authority” (Butler 13). There are many grand narratives in the cultural history of Western and non-Western world, such as “progressive emancipation of humanity—from Christian redemption to Marxist Utopia—and that of the triumph of science” (Butler 13). Both of them have their root in the Enlightenment. Enlightenment project tries to give a legitimation to the notion of progress in human culture in Western society the base of which is reason and scientific progress. Marxism has developed a grand narrative by projecting ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’²⁷ Eurocentrism, a belief in the superiority of European culture over African or Asian culture is another example. There is a distinct grand narrative existing in India in the name of Vedic Brahminism.²⁸ It claims that certain upper castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas) are born superior to the Sudra and thousands of Ati-Sudras. Postmodern philosophy attempts to destabilize all these grand narratives by incorporating that skeptical worldview to question the validity of such totalizing philosophy and identify it as oppressive narratives. Although Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979, the major tendencies of

²⁷ In Marxist political theory, it is argued that with the attainment of power by the working class who suffer in the hand of ruling class, the economic and social exploitation and injustice will come to an end and the world will see a new world that will be free from all sorts of oppressions. But Benedict Anderson shows how the so-called Communist countries, such as China, Russia, Vietnam, Cambodia have been fighting with each other over different political and economic issues. China’s monopoly over South China Sea is a new political tension. See Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed., London and New York, Verso, 2006.

²⁸ First postulated and canonized in verse ninety, Book Ten of the Rigveda, Brahminism refers to a theoretical and applied philosophy of superiority of Brahmins, a group of people said to have originated from the mouth of the Purusha, or the Vedic creator of the Universe. Later on, this philosophy has been radicalized and institutionalized in the Manusmriti, the canonical Law book of Brahminical culture. These two texts along with others gave rise to what is known as Vedic Brahminism, blindly professing this philosophy till date. It came to be known as Hinduism in later periods.

Postmodernism as skeptical and non-authoritarian worldview have taken theoretical shape in diverse fields as “Derrida’s challenges to the western metaphysics of presence; Foucault’s investigations of the complicities of discourse, knowledge, and power; Vattimo’s paradoxically potent ‘weak thought’; and Lyotard’s questioning of the validity of the metanarratives of legitimation and emancipation” (Hutcheon 23). It contextualizes a critique of what is known as Enlightenment project.

To echo the Enlightenment project which is primarily the 18th century French intellectual movement, it is argued that there is an all-pervasive law in human culture having “a magnificent symmetry and mechanical certainty” as well as “order, law, and indeed design” (Sanders 276); it bears within it “the prospect of a new, explicitly modern understanding of human beings’ place in the world, and of radical improvement in the human condition” (Robertson 41). It has an intellectual orientation to rely upon reason that is in turn the base of great advancement in philosophical and scientific advancement in 18th century England which was the womb of European Enlightenment. A parallel development of counter-Enlightenment also emerged in the last decades in 18th century France and Germany. The base of counter-Enlightenment is a skeptical attitude to the purity of reason. In other words, Postmodernism emerges as a deep-rooted skeptical attitude to reason that helped nourish all aforementioned presumed ‘grand narratives’ of human culture. It is anti-universal in temperament and anti-authoritarian in discourse. It sees entire human society as a multiple slices of different languages, of conflicting racial and casteist identities, of religious and cultural rivalries; therefore a presumed ‘grand narrative’ having a universally identical and homogenous character is impossible to exist. In other words, Postmodernism is an intellectual movement looking for “paradoxes, instabilities, and the unknown” in societies across the globe (Sim 9). According to Lyotard ‘grand narrative’

is repressive to individual creativity. He declares: “Let us wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unpredictable; let us activate the differences” (82).

But periodically Postmodernism is said to have emerged after Modernism. But the genesis of modernist worldview is rooted in the works of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Rene Descartes (1596-1650), and John Locke (1632-1704). They are the pioneers of modernist philosophical thought “because of their profound confidence in reason, and, especially in the case of Locke, their individualism” that mark the paradigm shift from Medieval philosophy (Hicks 7). The stress upon individualism, human capacity of forming a rational, progressive worldview and the celebration of human excellence are some common philosophical parameters. The entire Enlightenment project discussed above takes its inspiration from those founding figures. In the literary modernism in European literatures the date of which has commonly been ascertained from 1890 to 1930, the disintegration and dehumanization of human essence have become a major concern among literary practitioners largely because of the devastation in the World War I. Mathew Arnold lamented for the loss of morality and cultural values in his “Dover Beach” in late Victorian world the harsher reflection of which is found in *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot. But it has another aspect, that is, a harking back to past and refashioning and re-appropriating the artistic standard of Classical literature by adopting an avant-garde orientation. *Tradition and Individual Talent* (1919) by Eliot plays the role of cementing the presumed ‘glorious past’ to that of the present. But Postmodernism deviates from that sort of nostalgic attachment; and instead of lamenting for the loss of greatness whether in artistic production or in life it celebrates the emerging fragmentations in the post-War, Postcolonial European society at large and justifies the decline of a presumed ‘high artistic standard’ both in literature and art. To understand the differences between these two cultural movements one may look into the list of

binary Peter Brooker sets in the introduction to *Modernism/Postmodernism* (1992): Form versus Antiform; Purpose versus Play; Mastery versus Exhaustion; Totalization versus Deconstruction; Presence versus Absence; Centering versus Dispersal; Genre versus Text; Depth versus Surface; Lisible versus Scriptible; Signified versus Signifier (11-12). To sum up, Postmodernism opens up the gateway to multiple micro narratives or *petit recit* to demonstrate their cultural role to play. For the present research, Vedic Brahminism is the proposed grand narrative which is perhaps the oldest oppressive system the world and India have ever known; and Dr. Ambedkar's critique of it is the applied Postmodernist interpretation the result of which is the re-assertion of Dalit-bahujan culture as one of the micro narratives.

We can contextualize the Postmodernist tendency discussed so far in Cultural studies. If culture seems to be the central issue of discussion and critical evaluation, Postmodernism epistemology "sees culture as containing a number of perpetually competing stories, whose effectiveness depends not so much on an appeal to an independent standard of judgment, as upon their appeal to the communities in which they circulate" (Butler 29). In this sense, the concept and application of culture is bound to specific race, tribe, and caste. As an established discipline in British and American universities since 1960s and 70s, Cultural studies is "an interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary field of inquiry that explore the production and inculcation of culture or maps of meaning" (Barker 42). Although inclined to Humanities, not Social Sciences, it includes popular culture, globalization, regional culture or localized culture, racial conflict and political and social issues having a strong impact upon the formation of cultural resistance and identity in its discursive practices. In other words "... a good deal of [Cultural studies] is concerned on the question of how the world is socially constructed and in particular with the themes of 'difference' and identity" (Barker 43). Founded in 1964 as Centre for Contemporary Cultural

Studies at Birmingham University by Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, and others, “it has directed itself to a particular set of cultural formation--- those that connect most directly to its mainly secular, middle-class, leftist” as well as non-elitist, working class cultural phenomenon (During 7). Not the centre but the periphery, not the elite, but the marginal occupies a central place in Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), one of the founding texts of this discipline. The working class people, their life style, food, rituals, sports--- in other words, Hoggart presents a new world to his readers. Unlike the elite British culture, Hoggart documents the working class culture, thus sowing the seed of a similar sort of academic enterprise, such as African American cultural representation by W. E. B. Du Bois and other great African American writers, academicians, and activists and Dalit-bahujan cultural representation by a host of Ambedkarite literary and cultural critics, such as Sharankumar Limbale and Kancha Ilaiah in India. Terry Eagleton positively responds to what Cultural studies has done: In retrieving what orthodox culture has pushed to the margins, cultural studies has done vital work... to help create a space in which the dumped and disregarded can find a tongue” (13). Therefore, as an academic establishment Cultural studies adheres close to Postmodernist tendency, that is, paving the way for the cultural representation of the marginalized.

On the question of cultural representation of the marginalized people across the globe, ‘double-consciousness’ is a key concept to begin the discussion with. First coined and theorized by W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) in his celebrated *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), double-consciousness polarizes two distinct worlds in the American context: the American Negro and the White Americans. The central argument is, such is the precarious and peculiar situation that an American Negro has to “see himself through the revelation of the other world... this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” has become

a supposed cultural representation of the African Americans (8). In the Forethought of *Black Folk*, Du Bois acknowledges that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (3). The concept of double-consciousness therefore opens up the institutionalized mechanism of Racism in American society. The exclusion of African American cultural history from textbooks and portrayal of an American Negro as a slave or a servant in American novels are some institutionalized policies with the help of which the seed of Racism has been implanted. This makes the implication of double-conscious relevant. Every African American is quite aware of his or her place whether in private or public space: “For many black Americans this means having one cultural self at home and another cultural self in White-dominated public space, such as workplace and the school” (Tyson 362). The process of identity formation through cultural representation is a powerful instrument to African Americans to challenge the very racist training they have been undergone to looking at themselves through the eyes of White Americans. Du Bois debunks the authenticity of this White projection of Negro culture of America on the one hand and renders the Black interpretation of African American culture on the other in his *Black Folk*. With Tony Morrison receiving the Noble Prize for literature in 1993, Black American culture has been recognized worldwide. The publications of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay and *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* (2011) edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward exhibit the glorious four hundred years of African American cultural heritage grown independent of White American intervention. The inclusion of African American literature course in universities and the increasing publications and seminars add a great prestige in their cultural articulation. This self representation by African Americans inspires many

likeminded marginal groups of people across the world to destabilize the narrative of cultural hegemony and to articulate their own identity formed with the resources of their own society.

The emergence of Dalit-bahujan culture in India is comparable to African Americans. Dalit-bahujans in India have faced social exclusion, economic exploitation, and religious persecution in a caste-based hierarchical society for centuries. A parallelism can be drawn between Eurocentrism²⁹ and Aryanism, between Racialism³⁰ and Brahminism, between Racism³¹ and Casteism, between dehumanization of African American culture in White American literature and the criminalization and demonization of Dalit-bahujan culture in Brahminical literature, between invisible public space of African Americans in White-dominated American society and non-existent (if existent, it turns into a space of mental humiliation, disrespect, and torture) public space of Dalit-bahujans in upper caste-dominated public space in India.

The very disciplinary approach known as Dalit studies in Indian universities has emerged in recent years largely because of a series of political and cultural uprisings across India. The Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra in 1970s; the foundation of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) by Kanshi Ram in 1980s; the foundation of Dalit organizations across the country and their radical activities; the publication of Mandal Commission report³² and the implementation of its proposals in 1990s; the publications of a series of anthologies comprising of poems, short stories,

²⁹ A belief in the superiority of European identity and culture which is undoubtedly White-dominated. Aryanism on the other is the belief in superiority of Aryan identity and culture in India.

³⁰ It is a belief in racial superiority and inferiority, and purity based on the conviction that some race is morally, culturally, and intellectually superior to others. Brahminism on the other is a natural belief system in the superiority of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaidyas in Indian (Vedic Brahminism which is known as Hinduism) society.

³¹ Racism refers to a set of discriminatory practices any race with a presumed superior status properly channelizes through unequal power relation, dominance, and oppression. Casteism is a set of discriminatory practices that work in the aforementioned ways in India. It is a peculiar invention by Brahmins and other upper castes in India to sustain their supposed superior identity.

³² The Janata Party government appointed B. P. Mandal as the chairman of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC) ON January, 1979. The purpose of the Commission was to figure out different castes and tribes who have been socially and educationally backward and recommend special reservations in education and public employment.

in vernaculars as well as in English translations and formation of a Dalit readership and market; the participation of Dalit-bahujan scholars in the International Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racial intolerance held in Durban, South Africa in 2001-- all these put the Dalit-bahujan identity and cultural articulation on the frontline. Media, newspapers, journals, and more intensely social sites become a common space of discussions as well as criticisms. In other words, although there have been many Dalit-bahujan movements occurred in the last two hundred years, the very academic establishment of it is a recent inclusion. It disseminates knowledge about the culture of millions of people whose existence has never been acknowledged except in the system of slavery. Dr. Achintya Biswas, one of the founding members of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha (Bangla Dalit Literary Association) gives a quintessential definition of a Dalit and compares his state to that of a Proletariat: “A proletariat is he who has nothing; but a Dalit is he who is nothing.”³³ This nothingness of the Dalit-bahujan life and culture in India can be further compared to that of African Americans in America in two respects: one, both of them have suffered from the system of slavery but got no freedom; second, their social and cultural identity have never been acknowledged in their respective hierarchical society, hence the value of their life is non-existent. But the emergence of a consolidated African American identity has been shaped through a series of civil rights movement right from 1860s onwards. Following the same line of argument it is argued that a consolidated Dalit-bahujan identity has been shaped through a series of anti-Brahminical, anti-caste, and to a great extent anti-Hindu movement right from the time of Harichand Thakur in Bengal, Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra, and Ayothee Thass in Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth century. These movements form the base of what can be called a pan-Indian Dalit-bahujan emergence. Besides political activities,

³³ Dr. Achintya Biswas, professor of Bangla literature at Jadavpur University spoke it in an interview taken by Dalit Camera, published on April 19, 2017 on YouTube. See <https://youtu.be/VUZIAvgbEKA>

literary and wider cultural activities are its inextricable part, in other words, the essence of Dalit studies is powerful resistant narrative of cultural re-assertion in a caste-based hierarchical society where birth right determines the future of a person.

Dalit studies selects its primary texts in the established genres of literary studies, such as autobiography, poems, short stories, novels, essays, non-fictional writings, such as political pamphlet as well as political and sociological writings by Dalit-bahujan scholars and activists. But the present research takes a different route to reach to the root of the formation of cultural sensibility of 'Dalitwaadas'³⁴ by choosing folk rituals and songs. Prof. Kancha Ilaiah in his *Why I Am Not A Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (1996) theorizes his concept of 'Dalitization.' Dalitization,³⁵ according to him is a reconstructive process through which each Dalit community will rediscover the glorious past in their folk culture, songs, rituals, and beliefs. In the next stage they will preserve them; then they will promote them so as to modernize their cultural identity; and in this way they will be able to challenge the Brahminical projection of Dalit-bahujan culture on the one hand and represent their own heritage outside the Brahminical interference and monopolized exercise which is oppressive, unequal and poisonous on the other (115). By targeting the oppressive mechanism of Brahminism and its forced interference in the life and civilization of Dalit-bahujans, Prof. Ilaiah writes: "Dalitbahujan castes were never allowed to develop into modernity and equality. The violent, hegemonic, brahminical culture sought to destroy Dalitbahujan productive structures,

³⁴ Prof. Kancha Ilaiah uses this word multiple times in his *Why I Am Not A Hindu* (1996). The word can be split up into: Dalit and waada. Waada means settlement or locality. In this sense, Dalitwaada means Dalit settlements.

³⁵ Prof. Ilaiah coins this word to set up a critique of Sanskritization developed by M. N. Srinivas in his *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (1952). Sanskritization is a process of cultural mobilization among the lower castes and other marginalized tribes to imitate and adopt the upper caste rituals and other customary practices to move upward, thus creating a new social structure where the compartmentalization of caste system will fall down. But Prof. Ilaiah shows how Sanskritization fails in his book *Why I Am Not A Hindu* (1996). Dalitization has to be understood in an antagonistic relation with Sanskritization. In other words, Sanskritization and Dalitization are engaged in a binary relation.

cultures, economy and its positive political institutions” (114). He asserts that “We must, therefore, dalitize our entire society as Dalitization will establish a new egalitarian future for Indian society as a whole” (115). The focus on rituals, songs, dance, folk beliefs and myths, local deities, sports, indigenous technologies, indigenous medical therapies will therefore open up a renewed space to them to indulge in the cultivation of their culture and its modernization. If Sanskritization means the cultural mobilization among Dalit-bahujans to imitate and adopt upper caste culture, Dalitization refutes this concept by arguing that Dalit-bahujans no longer need to imitate upper caste rituals and festivals to initiate the process of upgradation and modernization of Dalit folk. In the words of Prof. Kancha Ilaiah “It is through loving ourselves and taking pride in our culture that we can live a better life in future” (131).

This channelizes a well-connected passage to reach to the present research, that is, cultural heritage of Chandal-turned-Namasudra caste the primary elements of which are rituals, both folk and religious; and songs, both folk and secular. The theoretical framework and its concepts discussed so far justifies that by selecting the folk elements of a marginalized caste the present research will be able to explicate their independently-built cultural heritage on the one hand, and to contextualize the Postmodern worldview of displacement of a grand narrative, such as Vedic Brahminism and celebration of a small narrative, such as Dalit-bahujan cultural representation in Post-Partition West Bengal.

The theoretical framework explicated so far is the very skeleton of the entire research. But there is another issue, that is, its external decoration. In other words, since rituals and songs are the primary texts and symbolism is one of the two themes to be evaluated, important concepts from the field of symbolic anthropology, ritual and performance studies, folklore, and musicology have been utilized in the thesis. The important concepts such as ‘sacred and

profane’ by Durkheim, ‘social action’ by Max Weber, ‘social drama’ by Victor Turner, ‘Dalitization’ by Kancha Ilaiah, Guruchand Thakur and Dr. Ambedkar’s critique of Vedic Brahminism (these concepts and their application in selected rituals have been elaborated in second and third chapter respectively) remain pivotal to understand the select rituals and songs and their relation with Chandal-turned-Namasudras’ community-based identity and its socio-cultural impact on the dalit emergence of Bengal. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912; 1995) by Emile Durkheim and *The Sociology of Religion* (1922; 1965) are two classical sociological works making a coherent analysis of religion from the perspective of ritual and social function respectively. The selected rituals practiced by a Dalit-bahujan community can be interpreted from Durkheimian and Weberian perspectives to acknowledge their socio-cultural heritage. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992) and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997) by ritual theorist Catherine Bell have been very useful to figure out the rise and development of different ritual theories including Functionalist approach as well as development of ritual-related concepts and their explanations.

Since symbolism and resistance are two specific themes to be dealt with, the second chapter ‘Symbolism in Rituals and Songs’ explains both symbol and symbolism and their relation with *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra* in particular, and the third chapter ‘Resistance in Rituals and Songs’ explains resistance and its relation with ritualistic practices related to Matua religion and *Chetana Sangeet* in particular. The protestant temperament of Matua religious reform paves the way for an intellectual evaluation of anti-Vedic and anti-Brahminical theology. The concept of Dalit theology as theorized by James Massey and others and examined among Tamil Dalit Christians is a key concept to theorize Matuaism as an alternative theological platform.

Catherine Bell outlines the origin of ritual as an important concept to understand society and culture in the following way: “The notion of ritual first emerged as a formal term of analysis in the nineteenth century to identify what was believed to be a universal category of human experience” (14). The two sides of ‘human experience’ are thought and action. Although theoretical discourse in ritual study focuses on both of them, the preference is given to its manifestation or ‘action.’ In other words, ‘ritualization’ as Catherine Bell uses this word comes to its fulfillment only when the ‘thought’ or a series of ‘mental blueprints’ are performed. Catherine Bell refers to “beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths” as the mental concepts or blueprints (Bell 19). Theoretical approach naturally tends to restore “the context of social activity” in ritual study (Bell 7). The focus of the Functionalist approach to ritual and performance is “what ritual accomplishes as a social phenomenon, specifically, how it affects the organization and workings of the social group” (Bell 23). In this respect, ritualistic practices accompanied with respective songs and musical instruments function as a set of symbolic orchestration that encompasses not only a large space (in this research it is rural space the structure of which is different from urban space), but also a mass gathering in respective locality which reflects upon the homogenous nature of belief, observances, language (in this case it is a dialect) and more importantly a consolidated identity of a respective community. The performative manifestations of ritual therefore transcend the personal imagination and expression and become the representative ‘social behavior.’

Ritual study begins with a fundamental question “whether religion and culture were originally rooted in myth or in ritual” (Bell 3). According to Emile Durkheim religion has two essential components: beliefs and rites. If belief is what is said (narrative) and rite is what is done (action or performance) in the evaluation of human culture, then both of them give birth different

approaches of interpretation such as evolutionary, sociological and psychological. The Functionalist approach to study ritual has its root in the anthropological and sociological writings of celebrated Western thinkers. French sociologist N. D. Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889) studied 'ancestor cult' in ancient Greek and Roman joint family lineage to establish his claim of rites having its root among the ancestors, thus showing a chain of rites prevailing among the present members (Bell 23). Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), the father of Cultural Anthropology shows the evaluation of human belief and rituals in his *Primitive Culture*: "... over the time humans generated more sophisticated belief systems which evolved through such practices as tree worship, reverence for a sky or rain god, belief in divine ancestors, the ideas of multiple deities... eventually culminating in worship of a Supreme Deity" (Cox 13). Tylor sought to analyze the evaluation of human culture having "the main tendency... from primeval up to modern times has been from savagery towards civilization" (19). This evolutionary view of human development from savage to civilized bears with it the gradual evaluation of their rituals and customs too. William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), a noted linguist and Old Testament expert put emphasis on the ritual in the genesis of religion and society by arguing "religion is made up of a series of acts and observances" the important function of which is "the preservation and welfare of society" (28-29). Sir James Frazer (1854-1941), a student of Smith and the legendary editor of *The Golden Bough* sees ritual as "the original source of most of the expressive forms of cultural life" (Bell 5). But the Functionalist approach owes its bulk of theoretical impetus in the writings of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) whose *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) is perhaps the most influential work in formulating the "social phenomenon of religion" and ritual. Durkheim writes "Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of

acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups” (9). Two fundamental concepts in Durkheimian theory of religion are ‘sacred’ and ‘profane.’ Durkheim points out that there are two sides in the social life of a person: real and ideal. The daily chores of life are part of real which he/she is living with. It is the manifestation of material world. But there is another world, that is, the world of belief and rites. According to Durkheim, what is related to material world is considered profane, but what is related to ideal or imaginary world is considered sacred. He clarifies it by saying that “All known religious beliefs... present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal... generally designated by... the words *profane* and *sacred* (34-35). Rituals and performances whether religious or secular do reflect these two fundamental concepts. To Durkheim sacred status of god or ancestor among members of certain community is nothing but a search for a common root as well as a manifestation of a consolidated social life. “As a social phenomenon, religion is a set of ideas and practices by which people sacralize the social structure and bonds of the community” (Bell 24).

British anthropologist Alfred Raginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) extended the Durkheimian concepts to frame a more coherent pattern of Functionalist approach to study rituals. “He saw orderly social life as dependent upon the presence in each member’s mind of certain sentiments, such as solidarity, goodwill, love, and hate, which control each member’s behavior” (Bell 28). But when the time comes to celebrate the ritual, each member’s sentiments get merged with the others. Rites or rituals in this sense are composite and balanced form of utterances that according to Radcliffe-Brown “transmit from one generation to another... on which the constitution of the society depends” (28). He speaks clearer when he says “what makes and keeps man a social animal is not some hard instinct, but the sense of dependence in the

innumerable forms that it takes” (qtd. in Waardenburg 601). He compares each ritual and custom with each limb of human body by saying that “every organ of a living body plays some part in general life of the organism” and likewise each ritual plays equally important role in making entire social living meaningful (229-30). Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1884-1942) was an eminent anthropologist who along with Radcliffe-Brown is credited with framing the Functionalist approach to study ritual and society in academia. Malinowski rather focuses on the individual experience that is achieved while celebrating rituals more than the social factor as done by Radcliffe-Brown. He argues that a few rituals might have social function to play but not all rituals. Religious rituals according to him do not always fulfill a prescribed social function or meaning, rather it relates a very personal observance “a form of communication with gods” (qtd. in Bell 28). The functionalist approach to ritual studies therefore can be applied in the selected rituals and songs celebrated by Namasudras in different times throughout the year.

But rituals and songs have an obvious relation with folklore. “Folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions, that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors and materials” (Sims and Stephen 12) The concept of ‘folk group’ is an integral part to study folklore because if folklore survives through oral transmission then the people who make this transmission possible over generations have to be closely studied too. The concept of ‘society’ in Functionalist approach to ritual study bears an analogy with ‘folk group’ in folklore study. The relation between ritual and folklore on one hand and between folklore and society on the other seem to contextualize the selected rituals and songs in the present research. “In order for there to be a ritual, then, there must be a set of beliefs and values that members of a group accept and want to have reinforced” (Sims and Stephen 95). In this argument there exists an

inseparable chain between ritual, folk belief and society. The rituals and songs prevailing among Namasudra community do represent this interconnected pattern in their composite utterances of their community-life.

Dalit theology connotes a revolutionary and protestant spirit rather than other-worldly metaphysically charged spiritual orientation. Matua religious movement emerged out of a deep sense of self-respect among Chandal-turned-Namasudras. The spirit of this movement was protestant, targeting Brahminical hegemony and Vedic autocracy; and its mechanism was to formulate a new religious identity and based on this identity a distinct culture. In this argument ‘Dalit theology’ seems to be an important concept. Dalit theology refers to “an affirmation about the need for a theological expression which will help them in their search for daily bread and their struggle to overcome a situation of oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy and denial of human dignity and identity” (Massey 63). On the other hand, *Chetana Sangeet* which is comparatively a new musical genre developed by the members of Chetana Mancha finds a common thematic relation to that of jazz music prevailing among African Americans.

The outline of the theoretical framework made so far in the first chapter does help the present researcher explicate the central argument of the research. The Chandal-turned-Namasudra community possesses a rich cultural heritage having rituals and songs as the chief medium of expression as well as a great socio-political reformist movement to their credit that have never been recognized in a caste-based hierarchical historiography and cultural narrative. Their ‘lower caste’ status is an artificial construction the chief architect of which is the Brahminical society. It is with a thorough study of selected rituals and songs that the central argument of the present research, that is, *the re-assertion and re-appropriation of a Dalit-bahujan community’s cultural heritage* has to be brought out where two major themes,

symbolism and resistance are to be evaluated. More than that, this outline does help maintain a coherent pattern of argumentation while working on them throughout the dissertation.

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Chapter Two

Symbolism in Rituals and Songs

The very commonly accepted notion of symbolism is that it is a systematic use of symbols either in graphic or in visual modes of communication to express artistic ideas or qualities. In this sense the core of symbolism is the systematic use of symbol. Symbol has multiple usages and applications to be found in different branches of knowledge, such as literature, theology, mythology, psychology, anthropology, and finally ritual studies. In general understanding a symbol stands for an idea or an object. A transcendental aspect lies in it, that is, to understand a symbol one has to go beyond the appearance of any word or thing. But symbol is culture-specific, having limited reach outside of any respective tribe or caste. To Chandal-turned-Namasudra the branch a ber tree is the symbol of the residence of Hanchra goddess in *Hanchra* ritual. It has a great cultural value to the members. But this branch does not hold such cultural value to non-Namasudras. The wheel in Buddhism does not appeal any significance to non-Buddhists. It proves that symbol which can be put within the wider sign system is traditional and culture-specific. In the study of English literature across universities symbol is quite common term to deal with in poetry and other literary genres. M. H. Abrams defines symbol in the following way: “In the broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something; in this sense all words are symbols” (311). A red signal in the traffic is a symbol for ‘stop’ and its green counterpart for ‘go.’ But in literature the meaning and application of symbol is distinguished in its literary use. M. H. Abrams explains that “In discussing literature, however, the term “symbol” is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself” (311). The ‘Rood’ in the *Dream of the Rood* (c. 10th CE) symbolizes the Cross; it is a religious symbol. The lamb

symbolizes innocence and simplicity, that is, the *unfallen world* and tyger (Blake retains this spelling) symbolizes the experience and knowledge, that is, the *fallen world*³⁶ in *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789) by William Blake. They are more related to psychological orientation of the poet. W. B. Yeats uses many symbols that can be called personal, such as the tower³⁷ that symbolizes not only ambition but also isolation. The use of symbols appears to be a common exercise among Romantic poets in almost all European languages. Shelley uses Skylark as a symbol to multiple entities including the poet himself and his ambitions in *To a Skylark*; and the West Wind is a symbol of revolutionary spirit in *Ode to the West Wind*. In the second half of nineteenth century a group of French poets emerged who are better known as Symbolist poets. Beginning with Charles Baudelaire this group includes Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stephen Mallarme, and Paul Valery. Their poetry is richly stuffed with symbolic interpretations of contemporary urban life and its grim realities. *Les Fleurs du mal*³⁸ (1857) by Baudelaire is an important symbolist work of poetry. The best-known book written on the subject is *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*³⁹ (1899) by Arthur Symons.

The rise of any organized religion gives a set of symbols their wider currency. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ universalizes the use of the Cross as a symbol of Christianity. “The cross on which Jesus was crucified was probably a tau cross... formed like the letter T... a symbol of eternal life through the sacrificial death of Christ” (Biedermann 82-83). But it is the symbol of physical suffering as well. Similarly the Dhamma Chakra is commonly used symbol

³⁶ Northrop Frye uses ‘unfallen world’ and ‘fallen world’ in his study of the poetry of William Blake. See Frye, Northrop. *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 42.

³⁷ *The Tower* (1928) is a collection of poems by W. B. Yeats. It includes among many others the poem ‘The Tower.’ See Siegelman, Ellen Y. “The Tower as Artifact and Symbol in Jung and Yeats.” *Psychological Perspectives: A Quarterly Journal of Jungian Thought*, Vol. 18, 1987, Issue 1, pp. 52-69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332928708408750>

³⁸ In English it is known as *The Flower of Evil*. The bare portrayal of urban life and its degeneration is the central theme of this collection of poems. T. S. Eliot hails it as the first modern book of poetry in any European language.

³⁹ Symons dedicates his book to W. B. Yeats who according to him is a major English-language symbolist poet.

in Buddhist culture. "... in Buddhism in particular with "the wheel of apprenticeship" whose movement through successive reincarnations frees humanity from suffering" (Biedermann 379). The eight spokes of the wheel symbolize the Noble Eightfold Path.

In the study of mythology the place of symbol occupies central place because in each mythical narrative symbolic meaning gives its wider cultural currency and applicability. To give a definition of myth Dom Cupitt writes: "a myth is typically a sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual" (29). There are various types of myths, such as fertility myth, creation myth, deliverance myth. Fertility myth is the symbolic narrative of a community's concern about fertility and reproduction. Isis in Egyptian mythology and Demeter in Greek mythology symbolize fertility respectively. Creation myth is the symbolic narrative of creation of the world and the people in respective beliefs. The Biblical narrative of the creation is an example of creation myth commonly shared by Christians. In all of them symbol appears to be the medium of communication, in other words it is through the symbolic interpretation of mythical narratives that readers come to know its central themes. To search for the root of the stories behind myth Edward B. Tylor writes: "Savages have been for untold ages, and still are, living in the myth-making stage of human mind... Its recovery has been mainly due to modern students who have... researched the ancient languages, poetry, and folk-lore of our own race" (236). The language, poetry, folk-lore, and rituals therefore are container of rich layers of symbols and myths existing among in every human race or tribe, or caste since antiquity.

In the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis symbol is given a unique value. "By uncovering the relationships between manifest symptoms and their latent meanings reflecting repressed unconscious contents, Freud uncovered, and at the same time explored, the processes

of individual symbolisation relating to an essential psychic function” (Smajda 78). The Oedipus myth is symbolic representation of the social order the violation of which will result in ultimate misery. In the Lacanian psychoanalysis the entire human life is divided into three orders, namely the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. He writes on the symbolic order that “Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him man” (49). The phallus according to Lacan is the symbol of power, not exclusively a symbol of male sexual domination.

In social and cultural anthropology the concept and usage of symbol is found as an essential part of personal and social aspects of human cultural narrative. Since “Social and cultural anthropology has the whole of human society as its interest, and tries to understand the connections between the various aspects of our existence” (Eriksen 1), this particular discipline takes symbol as an aesthetic means of gaining knowledge about the whole way of life. In other words, symbol is seen as a cognitive quality with the help of which we interpret the human civilization. The exercise of human essence makes its mark through a range of symbolic behaviors, such as meditation as a symbolic behavior of Buddhist life-style; doing ululation and bowing head before a branch of a ber tree by Chandal-turned-Namasudra women in their respective folk ritual are symbolic behavior of their cultural life. If symbol stands for an inner meaning or implication in the cultural life of a society, the symbolic behaviors exhibited at the time of ritual performances bring out inner implication of respective rituals in the whole life style of a tribe or caste. “The symbol in our view is somewhere at the centre of culture, the well-spring which testifies to the human imagination in its poetic, psychic, religious, social and political forms” (Rasmussen 1). Whether religious or political, symbolic behavior springs out of a complex dimension of social action. It is a celebrated concept in the sociological thoughts of Max Weber. The core meaning of Weberian sociology is it is a science “whose objective is to

interpret the meaning of social action” (7). He explains what social action is in the following way: “By ‘social’ action is meant an action in which the meaning intended by the agent or agents involves a relation to another person’s behavior and in which the relation determines the way in which the action proceeds” (7). There are three concepts to be decoded, the agent, the receiver, and the meaning. If it is a human orientation to reach to the certainty of meaning of every social action, Weber figures out two sets of meanings reflected from social action in his *The Nature of Social Action* (1922): one rational certainty and other empathetic certainty. The first kind is the result of logical and mathematical analysis of social action, and the second kind is imaginative and aesthetic analysis of social action. But both types provide a coherent system of communication. Symbol in human culture holds a complex position because of its open applicability in all sorts of actions, such as sports, classroom discussions, and political speech. But social and cultural anthropology inclines to the empathetic meaning and its communication.

Kenneth Burke defines human being as a “symbol using animal” (3); and the concept of reality is practically a “clutter of symbols about past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers and the like about the present... a construct of our symbol systems” (5). For example worshipping a clay-made crocodile among the Chandal-turned-Namasudra is considered very auspicious. It is believed that a small branch of a ber tree is the symbolic residence of their divine protector, Hanchra goddess. Among the Kurmi tribe of West Bengal the celebration of *Tusu* is considered as the holiest event in their cultural life. There is no physical shape of *Tusu* who is considered as their dear daughter who comes back to her maternal home from her in-law’s home once in a year. They make a small chariot out of jute stick and colorful papers to symbolize their dear *Tusu*. The above two rituals of this two communities or

tribes authenticate the respective social actions as symbolic behavior to celebrate their respective rituals. Social action of any community in its relation to ritual is therefore highly symbolic.

Social action as a cluster of symbolic behaviors holds an important place in the anthropological interpretation of culture and ritual by Clifford Geertz. Being a prominent symbolic anthropologist, Clifford James Geertz (1926-2006) defines culture in the following ways: “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (89). The expression of cultural elements through symbols such as a cross, a wheel, and in the case of Chandal-tuned-Namasudra community a branch of a ber tree or a clay-made crocodile represents a rich texture of respective cultural heritage. To talk about the importance of symbol Geertz writes: “It is a cluster of sacred symbols woven into some sort of ordered whole, which makes up a religious system” (129). British symbolic anthropologist Victor Witter Turner (1920-1983) studied *Isoma* ritual of the Ndembu tribe of northwestern Zambia, Africa. The initial step he takes is “to pay close attention to the way the Ndembu explain their own symbols” (10). This particular ritual is known as “women’s ritual” or “rituals of procreation” (11). Based on his ethnographic fieldwork he comes to know the intricate symbolic pattern involved in this ritual. The use of the hole or burrow made by a giant rat or an ant-bear is the site where the ritual is performed. “Both these animals stop up their burrows after excavating them. Each is a symbol (*chijikijilu*) for the *Isoma* shade-manifestation which has hidden away the woman’s fertility (*lusemu*). The doctor adepts must open the blocked entrance of the burrow, and thus symbolically give her back her fertility” (20-21). Turner shows how the specific actions meant for celebrating *Isoma* ritual are reflection of symbolic behaviors that remain so quintessential to understand the belief, custom, and heritage of Ndembu tribe. The interpretation of symbol and its

relation with ritual and religion through the lens of anthropology (cultural and symbolic) therefore remain very useful. British Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921-2007) studied the Lele tribe in Belgian Congo. Lele people are a subgroup of the Kuba people in Congo. Douglas's ethnographic fieldwork brings onto surface their way of life and its cultural values. Their food habit in terms of animal meat as well as the process of initiation to full manhood is full of symbols. Animal symbolism has a special place in their belief system: "Animal food offers a particularly rich field of discernment. Certain animals are abhorrent to all the Lele, men and women, and not considered as edible: rats, dogs and cats, snakes, and smelly animals such as jackals" (38). In the case of sexual intercourse "the man holds the woman in his left arm, and afterwards she is required to clean him with her left hand. The constant dissociation of right from filth, and its association with male, builds up the positive value of the male symbol" (37). The daily chores of life including food habit and rituals related to manhood initiation have their root in the daily chores of life; the symbolic orientation derives from it. In this sense rituals and its symbolic meaning are deeply rooted in their mundane life.

As examined above, the use of symbol is quite quintessential in different branches of human knowledge. But the present chapter focuses on the symbolic interpretation of selected rituals and songs of a marginalized but well-organized community of West Bengal. In this sense the use of symbol has to be appropriated in the ritual studies which has a commonality with anthropological interpretation of rituals and its social and cultural implication. Having taken important concepts from ritual studies, folklore, and symbolic anthropology such as 'sacred and profane', 'social action', 'folk belief and myth' the next course of discussions in this chapter interprets the inherent symbolism in the select rituals too. Since the central argument of this research is *the re-assertion and re-appropriation of a Dalit-bahujan community's cultural*

heritage, symbolic interpretation of rituals has to address Namasudra community's strongly built social identity. In other words, symbolic interpretation of rituals is the imaginative and aesthetic means to understand a dalit-bahujan community's cultural heritage at large.

The English word ritual derives from Latin *ritualis* meaning a close adherence to rite. Rite might have related to the Sanskrit *Rta* meaning order or rule: "the lawful and regular order of the normal, and therefore proper, natural and the true structure of cosmic, worldly, human and ritual events" (Boudewijnse 278). Tatal Asad provides some information in relation to the word 'ritual' and its definition appeared first in Encyclopedia Britannica and in some other dictionaries. In 1771 edition of Britannica the following definition of ritual is given as quoted in Asad's book: "a book directing the order and manner to be observed in celebrating religious ceremonies, and performing divine service in a particular church, diocese, order, or the like" (56). In the subsequent editions the definition gets expanded and "a reference to religious observances" has been included (56). In the 1910 edition the definition has finally been upgraded by including cultural aspects of ritual and its evaluation in anthropology (56-7). Symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner gives the following definition of ritual: "A ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (1100). The "stereotyped sequence of activities" seems to have a strong sway over the entire human activity. Ritual in this sense seems all-pervading. "At one time or another, almost every human activity has been done ritually or made part of ritual" (Bell 91). There are various types of rituals in the life of an individual as well as in the life of a whole community. Catherine Bell gives a detailed account of different types of rituals:

The following six categories of ritual action are a pragmatic compromise between completeness and simplicity. They are rites of passage, which are also called “life-cycles” rites; calendrical and commemorative rites; rites of exchange and communion; rites of affliction; rites of feasting, fasting, and festivals; and finally, political rituals... There are many other recognizable rituals... However the examples described above have been taken as prototypes for most classificatory systems. (94)

But all these categories of rituals are primarily “performative in nature; they are events... they cause that something to happen” (Wils 258). But rituals are “highly invariant which means that they are repetitive in nature and in that scenic repertoire” (Wils 258). But the body of performances whether routinized or invented does produce some essential meaning. In other words, rituals generate knowledge in its discursive practice. There are three interrelated ways to gain the knowledge. It is gained through the bodily gestures, through action (here action refers to entire duration of performance), and through “the alteration of that which is to be known” that means to treat them as a vehicle for something else (Jennings 115-16).

This alteration paves the way for symbolism to play its part in ritual studies. Victor Turner provides some essential inputs in relation to the place of symbol in ritual in his “Symbols in African Rituals” (1973). He defines ritual symbol as “the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour... the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context” (1100). The “specific structure” has a number of attributes. First is “multiple meanings (significata)”, that is, one ritualistic practice may have more than one possible interpretation; second is “unification of apparent disparate significata”, that is, analogical status between two apparently different ritualistic elements; third is “condensation”, that is, a balanced manifestation of diverse ideas, practices and behaviors in ritual; fourth is “polarization of

significata”, that is, various ritualistic practices appear to be opposite to each other (1100). “Rituals tend to be organized in a cycle of performances... In each ... there is a nucleus of dominant symbols” (1101). But there are many symbols which are less dominant. With the dominant and less dominant symbols each ritual irrespective of community, time and space generate the ritual knowledge; this ultimately generates knowledge about the cultural heritage of a tribe or a community.

Songs are vocal performance accompanied with musical instruments. Like speech it is also a verbal exercise; but the songs are added with different but fixed pitches or melodies or sounds. The way social action is explained as a cluster of symbolic behavior is the way songs can be explained as another kind of symbolic behavior the performance of which is done in respective private and public spaces and moments. For example singing “Happy birth day to you” to a kid is a symbolic behavior meant for celebrating the auspicious moment in his or her life. Songs sung in folk rituals and religious ceremonies bear this quality since primitive time. With ritualistic practices and songs each tribe or community weaves its own cultural heritage. In oral tradition songs have been handed down to successive generations orally; despite some alterations and modifications over the passage of time it keeps its symbolic function intact. The *Huloi* or *Uloi* song sung by Chandal-turned-Namasudras on the eve of Bastu ritual is a distinct symbolic behavior.

The discussions made so far about the place of symbol in ritual studies along with other disciplines definitely provide a theoretical pattern to study the select rituals and songs of a well-organized community of West Bengal. The symbolic interpretation of rituals and songs accompanied with particular musical instruments in the cultural life of Chandal-turned-Namasudra community of West Bengal seems quite productive in two specific reasons: first, no

research work has yet been done on their folk rituals as three of them have been recorded in the fieldwork for this research, that the present research takes its maiden initiative to explore them and address the symbols prevailing in those folk rituals and songs; second, the symbolic interpretation of cultural elements of a Dalit-bahujan community will establish a ‘cultural value’ as a part of entire ‘dalit discourse’, rather than simply positing it as a reaction to the hegemony of Brahminical culture.

The primary texts of the present research, that is, recordings of ritual performance are classified into three categories: folk rituals, ritualistic practices of Matua religion, and *Chetana Sangeet*, a modern musical composition. The three folk rituals selected are known as *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra*. The present chapter writes down those ritualistic practices having rich symbolic resources. The authentic description of rituals is given first and the symbolic interpretation of each ritual is given thereafter.

The origin and meaning of the word *Garshi* is uncertain, but this word is found in use among the community members as a name of their traditional ritual. The knowledge the present researcher has gained about *Garshi* primarily rests upon his talk with the aged members of this community during his fieldwork in respective villages in the district of Nadia, West Bengal. *Garshi* celebration starts at the last night of Bengali month Ashwin and goes on till the next morning, that is, the first day of the next month Kartika⁴⁰. There is a popular saying among the women in relation to *Garshi* celebration: *Ashwin mashe randhe bare, Kartik mase khay/ Jei ja bor mange, sei bor pai* (We cook in the month of Ashwin and eat in Kartika/ One gets whatever boon she asks). The *Garshi* celebration is described in details in the following pages. The family

⁴⁰ In Gregorian calendar the last day of Bangla month Ashwin and the first day of Kartika fall between 21st to 24th September in different year. Ashwin and Kartika are 6th and 7th month in Bangla calendar respectively.

members, young ones in particular are supposed to remain awake throughout the night of the last day of Ashwin and indulge in study. Meanwhile the women make many clay-made lamps and cook seven items of vegetables and some pie such as *Kuli pithe*, *Sora pithe*⁴¹ at home that night. Besides, they cook another special type of food, called *til-jau*, a sweet mixture of husked sesame seeds and rice powder. With the time passing away comes the first dawn of the new month Kartika. Around four or four-thirty at dawn the women first clean a small part of their courtyard by rubbing the space with water and soil; they decorate the rubbed space by putting different marks of rice powder liquid; in the next step they bring a bamboo-made winnowing basket and place it at the centre of that decorated space; next, they put the following ingredients on the winnowing basket: a twig of mango tree having five leaves, few palm seeds, few raw turmeric, few raw tamarind, twigs of neem leaf⁴², a small twig of banana leaf, few paddy seed, a bunch of *durba*, a commonly found grass around villages, and some pies, such as *Kuli pithe* they made last night. Once the ground gets prepared they start celebrating main part of their ritual. Meanwhile, young boys and girls beat the walls of their house with sticks and recite a rhyme: *Idur badur bhatite ja/ Tarar mul khunche kha./ Amage bari oi/ Ai bari thui* (Rats, bats go away/ Go to stars to eat./ That is our house/ Let us leave this house). Women who directly participate in the actual ritual light up the clay-made lamps and put them on the door steps and around the house; then the women do the ululation, play the conch; in the next step the women and young members of the family bow down their head before the decorated space; then the women bring a *shil nora*, a pair of grinding stones and put neem leaves and raw turmeric on it to make a paste; after the paste gets ready, the entire family members rub the paste all around their limbs and other body parts;

⁴¹ Bangla word *pithe* means pie. The chief ingredient used to make *Kuli pithe* is dough made of rice powder. It gets steamed before it is eaten. *Sora pithe* is baked with liquid of rice powder poured into small spoon-shaped cooking pot. It takes the shape of spoon. This cooking pot is made of burnt clay called *sor* or *sora*.

⁴² Leaf of *Azadirachta indica*, commonly known as neem tree. It is native to the Indian subcontinent.

next, they do their morning bath; they take some paste and go to the paddy field; they rub the sprouted paddy flower because they believe that the paddy is pregnant and that sort of nourishment will make the paddy healthy and she will bring forth abundant crops for them. The younger ones seek blessings from their elders; at last they distribute the pie among all and put an end to *Garshi* celebration.



Fig. 1. Women are lighting up clay-made lamps to illuminate their house in *Garshi* ritual (2nd week, December, 2019).

There is a folk belief lying behind this ritual. The belief is described below: the souls of the dead ancestors who secured their place in the heaven come down on the earth at night on the last day of Ashwin and visit their present generations to see how they are doing in the mortal life. To welcome the dead ancestors and make them happy, the family members, children in particular

remain awake throughout the night. Young boys and girls are told to indulge in study. Since the aim is to make the dead ancestors happy, they try their best to show the studiousness and discipline. If the dead ancestors find anybody sleeping or doing any mischief he or she is forsaken. But if they find young ones studying they become very happy and award them with boons.



Fig. 2. Women are playing conch and doing ululation while celebrating *Garshi* ritual (2nd week, December, 2019).



Fig. 3. The researcher is taking an interview of villagers during *Garshi* ritual (2nd week, December, 2019).



Fig. 4. A woman is busy grinding neem leaves and raw turmeric to make a paste in *Garshi* ritual (2nd week, December, 2019).

This belief among Namasudras reflects upon the existence of the ancestral cult. Merriam-Webster dictionary gives the following definition of ancestor cult: “a ritualistic system of veneration, honor, and propitiation of the spirits of dead ancestors for the purpose of avoiding evil consequences and securing good fortune.”⁴³ The entire practice of keeping themselves awake throughout the night and not indulging in any mischief is a set of symbolic behavior meant for seeking the grace of the dead ancestors. This symbolic behavior includes two opposite behavioral patterns: imitating what is considered good and rejecting what is considered bad. The realm of good is said to prevail over the bad; and the ritual participants young ones in particular attach a great value to the study as the prototype of good symbolic behavior. Dr. Birat Bairagya gives a different interpretation on the custom of study in Garshi⁴⁴. He says that this trend of indulging in study at night in Garshi ritual rationally derives from the education reform initiated by Guruchand Thakur since last few decades of nineteenth century among the Chandal-turned-Namasudras who had been denied the right to education by Vedic Brahminism. He compares Garshi ritual of Namasudras to the Saraswati⁴⁵ puja of Brahmins. In respect of the ancestor cult, Mr. Harasit Sarkar, editor of *SojaKotha* (Clear Voice), name of both a recognized weekly newspaper and a biennial journal and himself a resource person of this community has put his commentary to the researcher through telecommunication from Kolkata. According to Mr. Sarkar, the ancestor cult of Chandal-turned-Namasudras does not adhere to Hindu belief in an immortal soul; on the contrary of Hinduism, the followers of Matuaism see it as annual anniversary of remembering the memories of their dead ancestors who once upon a time were

⁴³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ancestor%20cult>

⁴⁴ Commentary on Garshi and other select rituals by Dr. Birat Bairagya is recorded in the respective interview taken at his residence by the researcher during his research fieldwork in the 3rd week of December, 2019.

⁴⁵ According to the Hindu belief Saraswati is the goddess of wisdom. But the caste-base Hindu society does not universalize education among all Hindus. Namasudras were denied the right to education. The practice of study in Garshi is a resistance to caste system of Hindu society. It bears a great cultural value since Guruchand Thakur had spread the importance of education among Namasudra and other dalit-bahujan communities in Bengal.

members of the present family. Although the etymological root of the word Garshi is uncertain, the researcher assumes that Garshi may be either the name of their ancestral parent or the name of a belief system in relation to the possible prospect of securing for the family members a place in the heaven the way their ancestors secured.

Lighting up the clay-made lamp and decorating the entire household with them is highly symbolic. The night is the symbol of evil whereas the light is of good. The lamp is the container that holds light. It is by lighting up the lamps that this evil is driven away from the life of the family members. Dr. Birat Bairagya says this ritualistic practice is the ‘Dewali’⁴⁶ of Namasudras. On the other hand, it is the symbol of a new beginning too since it is done at the dawn of the very first day of Kartika that seems to be an auspicious month (it is uncertain whether Kartika month had ever been considered to be the first month of their own calendar). The ingredients used such as neem leaf and raw turmeric are the symbols of their knowledge on indigenous medicine and of healing practices to keep the skin healthy. The ritualistic practices such as ululation and playing conch are symbolic of both praying for the dead ancestors and at the same time driving evil spirits away from their house. It is therefore found that Garshi, a folk ritual prevailing among the Chandal-turned-Namasudra community is stuffed with rich layers of symbols.

The word Bastu literally means house. The knowledge about this ritual has been gained from the community members. This ritual is dedicated to Bastu Devi⁴⁷, goddess of household and domestic prosperity. Although Devi is used, Bastu goddess does not share anything with Hindu pantheon, rather she belongs to the non-Aryan, indigenous mythology of Chandals. *Bastu*

⁴⁶ Diwali is known as the festival of light across the northern part of India.

⁴⁷A feminine gender of deva. In Rig-veda deva refers to god. It is used to refer to the Bastu or Hanchra goddesses because of the want of suitable words to signify their divine presence among the worshippers. For deva/deva explanation, See Jamison, Stephanie W. and Joel P. Brereton, translators. *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 37.

ritual takes place in the last day of Bangla month Poush⁴⁸. It has two parts: one is the main celebration done at late morning on the last day of Poush and the other is singing *Huloi* or *Uloi* song (in rural accent sometimes it becomes *Oloi*) the performance of which starts from few days back and continues till the night before the day of main celebration. *Huloi* or *Uloi* song has come down to the present members of the villages from their ancestors. Memory and imitation are two habitual means to young members to learn the style of singing and performing this musical genre.



Fig. 5. A band of singers comprising of men and young members are singing *Huloi* or *Uloi* song in a house at night on the eve of *Bastu* ritual (3rd week, December, 2019).

The two persons who first documented *Bastu* ritual in their ethnographic glossary are British civil surgeon Dr. James Fawns Norton Wise (1835-1886) in his *Notes on the Races*,

⁴⁸ It is the 9th month in Bangla calendar, overlapping December and January. The last day of Poush is widely known as Poush Sankranti in Bengal and that usually falls either on 14th or 15th January.

Castes, and Trades of Eastern Bengal (1883) and great British ethnographer and colonial administrator Sir Herbert Hope Risley (1851-1911) in his *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal of Bengal, Volume 1: Ethnographic Glossary* (1891). The following is the account Risley recorded about Bastu in his book:

At Bastu Puja on the Pous Sankranti, when earth goddess is worshiped the Chandals celebrate an immemorial rite, at which the caste Brahman does not officiate. They pound rice, work it up into a thin paste, and, colouring it red or yellow, dip a reversed cup into the mess, and stamp it on the ground in front of their house and on the flanks of the village cattle. (187)

Here is given the English transcribed version of three out of six collected *Huloi* or *Uloi* songs. The present researcher has transcribed them into English with his best knowledge of original Bangla so as to retain the originality of the song.

Song no. 1

(*Ore*) Hope you'll listen to the story of Rama and Ravana;

(*Ore*) The great Ravana invited his rivals in a fierce battle;

(*Ore*) Laxmana got wounded after the *Sakti-shell*⁴⁹ hit his body;

(*Ore*) Who will go to bring the healing drug for his recovery?

(*Ore*) Call one Hanuman who is the devotee of Rama;

⁴⁹ It is the one of the most deadly arrows possessed by Ravana in Ramayana. He hurled this arrow upon Laxmana.

(Ore) There is a plant called *Bisalakshmi*⁵⁰ in the hill of *Gandamadan*;⁵¹

(Ore) Not recognizing the plant Hanuman displaced the entire hill and brought it;

(Ore) Dear Laxmana recovered soon after smelling the juice of this medicinal herb;

(Ore) We'll celebrate Bastu puja⁵² by following the scripture;

(Ore) We therefore invite every house in our ritual;

(Ore) The guardian of this house is very fortunate

(Ore) To have wealth in plenty and a baby shining like a full moon;

Hail the boon of Bastu, let the goddess fill up their storage with rice.

Song no. 2

(Ore) Hope you'll listen to the story of the Bangladesh war;

(Ore) There was one Yahya Khan⁵³ in Bangladesh that time;

(Ore) His army was a devil's force, as criminal-minded as traitors;

(Ore) This devil's army ransacked the Sonar Bangla⁵⁴ and turned it into a burning ghat;

⁵⁰ A medicinal plant having the potentiality to heal deadly wound as described in the Ramayana.

⁵¹ A mountain believed to have been rich with resources many medicinal plants, such as Bishalakshmi in the Ramayana.

⁵² Puja is a common Bangla word used to refer to any idolatry celebrated by Hindus (but Muslims do not use it). But Matuas do not use it while celebrating their rituals and Matua-related religious observances. A recent phenomenon is quite note worthy, that Matuas are celebrating popular Idol worship, such as Durga puja and using this word randomly.

⁵³ Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan (1917-1980) was a Pakistani general. He was the third President of Pakistan. At the time of Bangladesh Liberation War his notorious army raped the women of East Pakistan and led a mass genocide there.

(Ore) They killed Bengalis by firing on them mercilessly;

(Ore) Rajakars⁵⁵ joined the devil's army and looted the entire Bengal;

(Ore) Thousands of people fled from their home and become refugees;

(Ore) Indira Gandhi⁵⁶, the Bharatmata⁵⁷ gave them recognition;

(Ore) Many of them got their home and it got filled up with paddy;

(Ore) Each house has wealth in plenty and a baby shining like a full moon;

(Ore) We'll celebrate Bastu puja by following the scripture;

(Ore) We therefore invite every house in our ritual;

Hail the boon of Bastu, let the goddess fill up their storage with rice.

Song No. 3

(Ore) Hope you'll listen to some incidents in the life of Mokkhin babu;

(Ore) Mokkhin babu was bathing at his cement-built ghat;

⁵⁴ Golden Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore's famous song 'Amar Sonar Bangla, ami tomay valobashi (My golden Bengal, I love you) is the source.

⁵⁵ The native East Pakistanis who supported the West Pakistan in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 are known as rajakar.

⁵⁶ Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) was a former Prime Minister of India. Her Congress-led government helped East Pakistani troop to fight against West Pakistan in the Bangladesh Liberation War. She worked to provide shelter to millions of refugees in her own country.

⁵⁷ Mother India. Indira Gandhi who provided shelter to refugees who migrated to India from East Pakistan is addressed as Bharatmata for her generous bilateral policy.

(Ore) Two constables⁵⁸ came at that time and tied his hands;

(Ore) Not only his hands but also his feet were tied too;

(Ore) He was taken to an address known as Faridpur house;

(Ore) It is not Faridpur house, rather the place is in Faridpur district⁵⁹;

(Ore) His mother cried a lot, standing on the road;

(Ore) His daughter cried too by holding pen and paper;

(Ore) His wife cried too, wearing jute-made sari;

(Ore) Caged pigeons as well as swans floating in the pond cried too;

(Ore) Doors and even the furniture cried too;

(Ore) See here is a dear brother coming wearing a dhoti;

(Ore) Mokkhin babu broke down and addressed this man as dear brother Dhiren;

(Ore) A lot of money arrived by cars yet he is not released;

(Ore) Not one or two, but ten to twelve cars came;

(Ore) How strange that at last he played piano with his feet and got released!

Hail the boon of Bastu, let the goddess fill up their storage with rice.

⁵⁸ In original Bangla song they use the word 'Chaprasi' the meaning of which is peon. But so far the thematic treatment of this song is concerned, it refers to police. This person might have committed any crime the consequence of which is his arrest by police constables. The rural folk while using Chaprasi might have meant police constables.

⁵⁹ Faridpur is a district in Bangladesh.

Villagers select a band of singers comprising both mature men and young boys (although the participation of women and young girls is not prohibited, it is not quite popular); they carry sticks meant for hitting the courtyard and making rhythmic sound along with the tune of the song; they start singing from one household and then moves to another; in this way they cover up the entire village; they carry bags meant for collecting rice and vegetable from the households. As the singing is concerned, they pray for the prosperity of the family at the last line of each song. In this way they perform the song since one or two weeks earlier and stop it at the very night before the next morning's main *Bastu* celebration on the last day of Poush. The words used to compose this song have rural accent. There are many varieties of themes dealt with in this song, such as myths and legends, contemporary political situations, and the depiction of the daily chores of life.

The number of songs is quite many. This genre falls in the category of oral songs the germination of which lies in the respective folk. Oral tradition exists on the level of transmission from one generation down to another with or without modification and sometimes interpolations. But the knowledge the researcher has gained about this song-making culture is that none of the songs has been transcribed yet hence there is little chance of interpolation or misrepresentation; the incident of distortion or interpolation of oral tradition takes place at a time when outsiders come and interfere. So long as the song remains restricted within the group, it retains its homogeneity as well as its purity; even in terms of including a new word in the existing musical vocabulary there is little chance of distorting the existing word order in any song because the choice of a new word is traditionally included from the localized tongue of the respective community; and in the present case it gets restricted within the rural folk of Chandal-turned-Namasudra community.

Huloi or *Uloi* song has some essential characteristics that contain some symbolic meaning. The entire musical performance itself is symbolic at the beginning of *Bastu* ritual. It plays the role of providing forecast to the villagers that *Bastu* ritual has come to their doorstep. There is a lead singer in the team. He sings each line of the songs first and the rest of the singers of the team sing the same line thereafter. The lead singer is a mature man who seems to be an expert in memorizing and singing. Each line of a particular song begins with ‘*Ore*’, a loud introductory vocal sound. It is done in order to make the members of respective family aware of a band of singers’ approaching to their house as well as to make the other singers ready. The sticks the singers carry are used not only to make rhythmic sound by hitting the ground but also used to beat the walls of house they visit in order to drive away evil force. This act is highly symbolic. The last line of each song is “*Hail the boon of Bastu, let the goddess fill up their storage with rice.*” This is primarily the prayer they do for the welfare of every house and at large the entire community members. The *Huloi* or *Uloi* song therefore bears a great symbolic value.

The main celebration of *Bastu* takes place at the late morning on the last day of Bengali month Poush called ‘Poush *Sankranti*.’⁶⁰ The site selected for celebrating this ritual is an edge of a pond. Young boys build a clay-made crocodile the tail of which rests just above the water. It looks as if the crocodile comes out of water and rests over there. A clay-made mound having three or four square-shaped stairs is built and a branch of Jibli tree is planted at the middle of this mound. The celebration begins with women decorating this branch with all sorts of flowers available in villages. They decorate the crocodile with different colors and flower too. They put sweet, milk, slices of fruits, and rice in the mouth of crocodile; put them at the root of this branch

⁶⁰ In most of the north Indian states it is known as Makar Sankranti, whereas in Tamil Nadu it is known as Pongal.

as well as around the mound. They light up lamp, burn incense stick and put them before the mouth of crocodile and around the mound. Then the women do ululation and play conch to pray Bastu, the goddess of shelter and domestic welfare. Next they bow down their head to touch the soil and offer reverence to both their goddess and the crocodile and in this way they put an end to *Bastu* ritual. As an extension of the ritual the villagers cook rice and vegetable they collected while singing the song and feed the villagers that evening.

The use of Jibli tree, according to the folk belief is the symbolic residence of goddess Bastu. It is believed that Bastu who does not have any physical form like Hindu goddess Durga or Kali or Saraswati comes down among her devotees and stay in this branch during the ritual performance every year and observes the ritualistic practices of her devotees. This belief leads them to decorate the branch with all sorts of flowers they can collect from around the village and give it a feminine shape. According to Dr. Birat Bairagya the branch of Jibli tree is the symbol of life. Another interpretation can be put forward here. Since Namasudras are primarily agrarian their first hand knowledge about the secret power of nature as well as its contribution to making their respective geographical location or space resourceful has made them well-trained to preserve natural world they are surrounded by.



Fig. 6. A full-grown Jibli tree the branch of which is used as a symbolic residence of Bastu goddess during Bastu ritual. It is known as *Jiye gachh* among villagers. (3rd week, December, 2019).



Fig. 7. Villagers are celebrating *Bastu* ritual on the last day of Bangla month Poush. A decorated branch of Jibli tree and a clay-made crocodile are seen in the ritual space. (3rd week, December, 2019).

Using a branch of a tree and attributing on it divine qualities show their conservationist mindset as well as creativity. To give it wider currency they use it in their respective rituals.

There is a myth behind the use of crocodile in this ritual. The mythical story as told by Mr. Matilal Biswas, a respectable villager who, according to villagers is an authority on the topic is a part of wider Hindu mythology. It is narrated like this: The crocodile was a man who used to destroy the houses of others including nests of birds and other animals. One day the homeless animals meet the Narayana⁶¹ and express their grief and demand justice. Being angry Narayana curses this man that he will lose his human status and become a crocodile so that he will always live in water and never get any shelter on land. This man-turned-crocodile meets Brahma and

⁶¹ According to Hindu mythology Narayana is one of the three great gods, other two being Brahma and Shiva. Narayana is the god of protection. But this mythical narrative attached to it seems an interpolation or later imposition because the commentary of Mr. Matilal Biswas does not find similar sort of assurance from other villagers. They are not quite familiar of this kind of interpretation that the clay-made crocodile was a man before he turned into a crocodile. However, this interpretation demands a further cross examination.

request him to forgive him and give his home (*bastu*) back. Brahma turned down his request and told him to go to Narayana. When he approaches Narayana he told him to visit the place where villagers worship goddess Bastu in the auspicious day of Poush *Sankranti*. The crocodile then comes out of a river and lies down on its bank where people are celebrating *Bastu* ritual. When they see it, they fled in panic; but some elders understood that this crocodile perhaps seeks the grace of Bastu goddess. They told the women not to get panic anymore and give it a shelter just around this place. Since this day the crocodile gets his shelter (but temporarily) in the *Bastu* ritual. But there is another quite different interpretation of the crocodile. According to Dr. Birat Bairagya the crocodile which is made of clay is the symbol of earth. Since Chandal-turned-Namasudras are agrarians, their connectivity with soil is inseparable, in other words, their daily survival rests upon the soil and water. This interdependence leads them to symbolize different usages of water and soil to fit into their ritualization. To the researcher the last commentary by Dr. Bairagya seems much more reliable, whereas Mr. Matilal Biswas's account seems to be a later incorporation of Hindu influence and cultural interference. Chandal-turned-Namasudras are the indigenous people living in the lower Gangetic plain. Any mythical narrative of Hindu culture cannot be a part of their cultural heritage.

Hanchra, like *Garshi* and *Bastu* is another folk ritual celebrated on the last day of Bangla month Falgun. The knowledge about this ritual is gained from the respective villagers. This ritual, like *Bastu* includes folk songs. Although the meaning of this word is uncertain, to villagers it is the name of their folk deity, Hanchra goddess; and like Bastu goddess Hanchra does not have any physical form. The celebration of this ritual takes place at morning on the last day of

Falgun⁶². Both unmarried girls and married women celebrate it in their respective villages. To celebrate this ritual women first select a space nearby the *thakur ghar*⁶³ located in their house compound. They rub this space with water; build a mound with clay having two or three squire-shaped stairs; and put a small branch of a ber tree⁶⁴ in the middle; they decorate this branch as well as the mound with all sorts of flowers available in and around the village; they slice fruits, place sweets on a plate, bring *khoi*, *muri*⁶⁵, sweet card and many other food items (any non-vegetarian item is strictly prohibited); then girls and women sit together and start their ritualistic practices. They sing songs and do ululation together; while celebrating the ritual the participants pray to their goddess to fulfill their wishes. According to the commentary of the villagers their prayer to the goddess is primarily directed to the recovery from different diseases that children and young girls get affected with. Besides, there are many wishes such as domestic prosperity in the life of a newly married woman or progress in the study of sons and daughters. They pray through their songs to the goddess and ask her to fulfill their wishes. After they end up singing songs they give ululation and bow down their head and touch the soil to show their reverence to their Hanchra goddess. In this way they put an end to *Hanchra* ritual.

⁶² The 11th month in a Bangla calendar. It overlaps February and March. The last day of Phalgun falls either 19th or 20th March.

⁶³ It refers to a small house built to place the respective divine protectors of each community in each of their house.

⁶⁴ Indian jujube or ber scientifically known as *Ziziphus mauritiana*. In Bangla it is called *kul gachh* (gachh=tree).

⁶⁵ Two common homemade Bengali snacks made out of rice. *Khoi* is made by putting raw paddy seed in hot sand and *muri* by putting husked rice seed in hot sand.



Fig. 8. Women are singing songs while celebrating *Hanchra* ritual. A small branch of a ber tree has been set right at the centre of the ritual space. It is beautifully decorated with all sorts of flowers available in and around villages. (3rd week, December, 2019).

The following is the English transcribed version of one of their songs they sing to pray their Hanchra goddess and celebrate the ritual.

Hanchra Thakur⁶⁶, you have grown curly hair

Banya flower gets attached with it.

O, you don't like the *Banya* flower!

Don't worry, we'll bring for you *Bhati* flower.

⁶⁶ Thakur is used in colloquial usage to refer to both god and goddess by Bengalis. Namasudras use *thakur ghor* to refer to a small house for their respective deity they believe to be their divine protector. This word does not necessarily mean male deity rather it includes female deity as well.

O, you don't like the *Bhati* flower!

Don't worry, we'll bring for you *Dhutura* flower.

O, you don't like *Dhutura* flower!

Don't worry, we'll bring for you pumpkin flower.

O, you don't like pumpkin flower!

Don't worry, we'll bring for you bottle gourd flower.

O, you don't like bottle gourd flower!

Don't worry, we'll bring for you yam flower.

O, you don't like yam flower!

Don't worry, we'll bring for you hyacinth flower⁶⁷.

O, you don't like hyacinth flower!

Don't worry, we'll offer you our body as a flower.

O, you don't like it too!

Then tell us which flower you like the most.

O, our dear Hanchra Thakur, you have grown curly hair

⁶⁷ The varieties of flowers mentioned in this song are the offerings the rural folk dedicate to their Hanchra goddess. Some of them have equivalent English names such as *Kumro phul* is pumpkin flower, *Lau phul* is bottle gourd flower, *Kochu phul* is yam flower, *Kachuri phul* is hyacinth flower. But there are names of other sorts of flowers in their songs that are hardly to be found in English vocabulary, such as *Bhati* flower, *Banya* flower. *Dhutura* flower is used in English besides its standard English name, such as moonflower or devil's wood. All of them irrespective of their scientific genus are typical of rural Bengal, especially in the Namasudra settlements.

We'll worship you with our tears.

What is striking in this song is the rich references of all sorts of flowers available around the villages; all these flowers have become the most important component of their songs, in other words, if their song is sung to please the goddess, these varieties of flowers are her gifts. The style of the singing is like that: first they utter the name of one type of flower in the first line and in the next line supposing that the goddess is not happy with this flower utters another type of flower to offer. In this sense there is a pair of lines in which first one is rejection of one type of flower and the second line is the affirmation of another. At last when they exhaust their flowery resources they offer their whole body as if they are offering the last available flower they possess within their limited means. The entire musical composition is symbolic attempt to make their goddess happy. Since they pray for keeping themselves and other community members healthy as well as for expecting all-round domestic prosperity, comparing their body to a flower and offering it to her is the ultimate symbolic effort they can make within their limited means to please their goddess. This musical composition and its practice bear a great cultural value in their folk ritual too.

According to the folk belief, Hanchra is their goddess of healing and health. The use of a branch of a ber tree is a symbol of goddess Hanchra's residence during the ritual celebration. In this case it bears a close analogy with *Bastu* ritual. The way goddess Bastu is said to have come down and stay in the branch of Jibli tree is exactly the way goddess Hanchra is said to take her seat in this small branch of ber tree and observe the ritualistic practices of her devotees. This folk belief and based on the belief the symbolic representation of their goddess who does not have any physical shape bear a great cultural value among the Chandal-turned-Namasudra community.



Fig. 9. The researcher is taking an interview of aged women to gain knowledge about *Hanchra* ritual (3rd week, December, 2019).

The selection of the space to celebrate the ritual is also very symbolic. As mentioned earlier it is selected nearby the house of deity in a house and placed it eastward so that the morning sun can touch the entire ritual space. Bangla month Phalgun is thought to be the intersection between winter and spring, it bears a symbolic value. Since *Hanchra* is celebrated on the last day of Phalgun, the winter takes its departure and spring makes its arrival. Spring or summer is said to be the time of all sorts of skin diseases. Celebrating *Hanchra* ritual at that time is the symbol of the beginning of their would-be new healthy life in summer. The use of a ber tree is symbolic in another sense. There are a lot of small but very sharp thorns all around a ber tree. According to the folk belief the thorns in its branch are symbol of surgery instruments with the help of which their goddess will cure infectious diseases from deeper layer of the skin. Dr. Birat Bayiragya is of the opinion that the thorns are symbols of all sorts of obstacles in the life of

the agrarian family. Celebrating goddess Hanchra is the symbol of overcoming all the obstacles in life.



Fig. 10. The researcher is taking an interview of Dr. Birat Bairagya, PhD, D.Litt on the select folk rituals (3rd week, December, 2019).

The discussion made so far about the first three folk rituals is the outcome of an ethnographic fieldwork done as an observer among its participants over a month among the Chandal-turned-Namasudras living in a cluster in some villages in the district of Nadia, West Bengal. “Ethnography is the process of studying and learning about groups of people, as well as the written description and analysis of those observations” (Sims and Stephens 202). In the fieldwork the knowledge about folk group, their collective conscience, the sentiment of their community-based identity as well as the uniqueness of their cultural heritage have therefore been

well-documented. According to Dr. Nandadulal Mohanta⁶⁸ the emergence of Matua religion under the leadership of Harichand Thakur and the social and religious reform under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur led this large group of people get socially united. Although the traditional rituals have been prevailing among them over centuries, the well-organized community identity helps them articulate it more vocally. But despite their religious and social unification, the concept of folk group seems a clue to go deeper into their pre-literate social existence. In other words, the Matua identity has come down to them since the Harichand era. But any sort of documentation in respect to their social, political, and cultural conditions remain unknown. In this sense, their oral tradition seems the only available means of knowing their cultural heritage. The folk belief found among this folk group is religious. Religious belief may not always be understood as an essential part of any organized religion; rather religious belief means sacred belief: “Sacred rituals are associated with nearly every group that has beliefs about spiritual or supernatural worlds or phenomena” (Sims and Stephens 102). Chandal-turned-Namasudras being agrarian the concept of sacred connotes a deep-rooted trust and reverence to various aspects of natural world. Belief in Bastu goddess and Hanchra goddess is indicative of the manifestation of the secret power of nature through the rituals. The rich imagination of the rural folk in invoking their respective goddesses and invoking the dead ancestors in *Garshi* ritual are exemplary of their sacred folk beliefs.

The songs sung along with the folk rituals do exhibit the oral tradition prevailing among them over centuries. Oral tradition as exemplified in ethnographic fieldwork done among the select villages has some essential characteristics to note down. The authorship of the select songs is uncertain; the present singers inherited them from their ancestors; they have not been

⁶⁸ The commentary of Dr. Nandadulal Mohanta on Matua religion is recorded in the research fieldwork at his residence in the 3rd week of December 2019.

transcribed in Bangla yet; since no research works have been done on the chosen folk rituals it seems that the existence of *Huloi* songs is restricted within the community. Jack Goody discusses the place of songs in oral culture as well as in folk rituals in details:

Song plays a very important role in oral culture. The words of a song often resemble lyric poetry in form, having to be of a tight metrical structure because of the musical accompaniment... Songs may be included in rituals as well as in folktales and other genres, but they are often performed solely for entertainment. The melodies themselves may be elaborated and expanded upon by way of musical instruments, leading to innumerable variations invented for the occasion. (50)

The songs in *Bastu* and *Hanchra* rituals have added a cultural value to a great degree. First, it has brought the folk rituals in the category of orality the rich resources of which can be found in *Eastern Bengal Ballad*⁶⁹, a collection of folk songs prevailing among the unlettered peasants of rural Bengal since medieval period. Although not included in this collection, *Huloi* song can claim a high position in the entire oral culture of Bengal. Second, the thematic treatment in those songs closely adhere to the local myth-making culture the reference of which Raja Rao makes in the preface of his first novel *Kanthapura*⁷⁰ (1938). Third, those songs have authenticated the uniqueness of their musical properties that can distinguish them from other songs.

⁶⁹ Dinesh Chandra Sen compiled many songs and verse dramas prevailing among rural folk of certain provinces of East Bengal such as Mymensing. This was published in 1923 in four volumes under the title of *Eastern Bengal Ballads*. Since this publication the study of folk literature became quite well-established in Bangla literature.

⁷⁰ In the Preface of *Kanthapura* (1938), Raja Rao talks about '*Sthalapurana*', meaning a localized or regional myth or legends prevailing among the respective rural folk. They are the creator of the local legends. This myth-making tradition is found in each Indian village.

So far the symbolism in the select rituals and songs has been discussed it is quite understandable that *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra* rituals are highly symbolic in both their composition and their performatives. Being folk rituals, the respective folk beliefs and myth add a higher ritualistic value. Within the symbolic representation of the select folk rituals the concept of sacred and profane seems to play a pivotal role in establishing their spatial and temporal distinction from other chores of life. Emile Durkheim elaborates the spatial and temporal dimensions in the religious celebrations the gamut of which is ritual. Setting the conceptual paradigm of sacred or religious life and profane life throughout a year Durkheim writes:

“... religious and profane life cannot coexist in the same space. If religious life is to develop, a special place must be prepared for it, one from which profane must be excluded... religious and profane life cannot coexist at the same time... religious life must have specific days or periods assigned to it from which all profane occupations are withdrawn. Thus were holy days born. (312-13)

A space before the door step in the courtyard is selected in *Garshi* ritual, a space beside a pond is selected in *Bastu* ritual, and a space nearby the house of deity in *Hanchra* ritual. For the respective days of celebration these chosen spaces are treated sacred and therefore ritualistically prohibited to use them for ordinary usages. The three folk rituals are celebrated in a particular day each in the Bangla calendar and those days are considered sacred. Members of the house where the rituals are celebrated do not violate the sacred status of that day by indulging in any non-religious acts such as quarreling with neighbors or harming anyone intentionally or revengefully. The dual paradigms, space and time have respective symbolic function to play in the ritual celebration and the members are faithful to them too.

The first three folk rituals fall in the category of calendrical ritual. According to Catherine Bell calendrical rituals are determined by calculating its relation with both solar and lunar calendar (102). One common feature of such rituals is “an ever-renewing cycle of days, months, and years” (102); repetition of rituals on the same day and at the same time in the next year and observances of them in the same way are “an ordered series of eternal re-beginnings and repetition” (Smith 109). There are two types of calendrical rituals, seasonal and commemorative. Harvesting ritual is seasonal whereas celebration of birth or death anniversary is commemorative. The three folk rituals are seasonal in the sense that they are deeply rooted in the agrarian ethics that highlight the human-nature relation; at the same time they are commemorative since those rituals are dedicated to their respective folk goddesses.

Matua Religion

Any organized religion does have a set of ritualistic practices meant for communicating with their divine being. Both monotheistic and polytheistic religions observe the respective ritualistic practices on specific days in a calendar as prescribed in their respective scriptures. The practice of meditation in all schools of Buddhism is quintessential of global Buddhist culture. The Sunday church service is a Christian ritual for communal worship, a gathering of people to be taught the ‘Word of God.’ The Islamic prayer to the God five times in a day is a unique mark of global Islamic culture. In all these rituals the respective behavior can be interpreted as symbolic meant for communicating with their respective divine being as well as marking a demarcation of their religious belief with others. Apart from the ritualistic practices, there is a set of symbols as a vehicle of its cultural values across time and space in all organized religion. Each

religious symbol whether a cross or a wheel has its unique place in respective religious beliefs that millions adhere so close to their daily chores of life. "... religions are predominantly characterized by their symbols. The Christian religion is a set of relationships with God mediated by the Christian symbols" (Dulles 19). Matuaism as a distinct religion⁷¹ emerged in the second half of nineteenth century "in protest against "Vedic Brahminism"⁷² (Walker 564-5). Since its consolidation under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur who "integrated Bengal's great Namasudra community into one unit... and skillfully organized their ongoing mass conversion to Matuaism" (Walker 565), it has given a set of symbols their wider recognition and symbolic function, that is, communicating with its godheads, Harichand and his wife Shanti Devi. Therefore two things are to be noted: one, the ritualistic practices of Matuaism and the other, the symbols used to perform the practices in it. The following is a list of some of their religious rituals, musical instruments, and other sorts of essential elements to found in Matuaism: *matam*, *dol*, *dankha*, *kasar or kashi*, *nishan*, festoon, and garland of coconut shell cut and shaped into small pieces. All these bear distinct symbolic values in this system of belief.

⁷¹ Matuaism can claim a distinct religious identity for itself by the virtue of its religious, cultural, and social resources. First, it has its respective godheads; Second, it has prescribed scripts written in Bangla; third, it has millions of its followers who closely adhere to this belief and the Matua way of life; fourth, it has a morally and ethically strong socio-cultural values validating equality, liberty, and fraternity among all; fifth, it has developed its own rituals and religious practices to celebrate on different occasions in Bangla and Gregorian calendar; sixth, it has developed a holistic and utilitarian philosophy over the centuries; and seventh, it has a glorious socio-political history in its credit. Although Hinduism does not recognize its separate religious identity, many followers of Matuaism have rejected the Hindu identity and demonstrate their Matua Identity. Since Matuaism destabilizes the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Manusmriti, and many other Hindu religious texts as well as the concept of Brahminical hegemony, it according to the present researcher is not a branch or tail of Hinduism, rather a distinct independent religion indeed.

⁷² It is a common term used to refer to the superior status of a Brahmin in the fourfold caste structure of Hindu society. Based on the hierarchically vertical structure the top to bottom place of which is occupied by Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra respectively, Brahminism later on polarized the fourfold structure into two opposing sides, one the first three castes forming upper caste and only sudra forming the lower caste. This hierarchically vertical relation is given divine certification. Later on the caste status was made strictly based on the birth right, in other words, a child born in any of the three upper caste families is destined to be an upper caste in his life and a child born in a sudra family is bound to become a sudra forever. Hindu scriptures like Manusmriti becomes the most authoritative text to hold on this caste discrimination. Harichand and Guruchand fought against this inhuman, unequal, and oppressive system. Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), Savitribai Phule (1831-1897), Ramasamy Periyar (1879-1973), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) fought against this system throughout their life. Matua religion is a protestant movement that destabilized the Brahminical hegemony and debunked the infallibility of Vedas, Upanishads, The Gita, and the Manusmriti. There are plenty of books on the subject. But one can begin with *God as Political Philosopher: Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism* (2001) by Prof. Kancha Ilaiah.



Fig. 11. Harichand Thakur and his wife Shanti Devi. They are the parental figures of Matuaism (4th week, December, 2019).

Matam or community-dance is the chief ritualistic practice to followers of Matuaism. It consists of men, women, and children who move the upper part of the body by raising their hands straight up and shake the entire body including feet along with the beating of their chief musical instrument called *Dankha* or *Joydankha*, a big circular drum beaten by small wooden sticks along with beating *Kasar* or *Kashi*, a metallic flat musical instrument. These two instruments beaten together with wooden sticks in a particular rhythm create such a sonorous as well a rhythmic loud sound that it (as the researcher's experience in field work is concerned) is irresistible, in other words, even the bystanders either move their toe or fingers and shake their head along with the rhythm. To the followers of Matuaism it is symbolic behavior denoting

many things, such as showing their religious solidarity, their physical exercise as well as their devotional attitude for seeking the grace of Harichand and his wife Shanti Devi.



Fig. 12. A Matua religious confluence where men, women and children are performing *Matam* with their musical instruments. (4th week, December, 2019).

The formation of *dol* or a long precession is a unique creation of Matua religion. Guruchand Thakur is said to have planned and executed it when he was handed over the leadership of entire Chandali-turned-Namasudra community after Harichand's death in 1878. The composition of a *dol* consists of both animate and inanimate elements. Its animate elements consist of men, women, and children with a *dolopati* or a head who lead the *dol* by walking in the front of the procession. A powerful man has always been selected as *dolopati* the reason of which is he is supposed to protect and organize other members of his *dol*. The number of people in a *dol* is not less than ten and the maximum number can be above fifty. Its inanimate elements consist of a big festoon having portraits of Harichand and his wife Shanti Devi curved on it, a

short but thick stick that a *dolopati* holds, many *nishan* or a triangular flag having white border and red body well tied up at the top of a bamboo-made pole, *dankha*, *kasar*, *jhajhri* or small round metal having small iron balls inside it meant for making sounds whenever it gets shaken and *singa* or a crescent-shaped cone for making particular sound.



Fig. 13. A *dol* of Matuas is seen holding their street procession with all of its animate and inanimate components. (4th week, December, 2019).

The importance of a *dol* in a Matua society is immense. It is the symbol of their well-unified community as well as a concrete representation or exhibition of their religious identity. In all affairs, whether religious, social, or political, formation of a *dol* comprising people of all ages from every house of a village and a street procession to join this affair thereafter has become over the years the hallmark of Matua society. What has to be noted is that by hearing the beating of *dankha* and its loud sound others recognize that a Matua *dol* is approaching. The *nishan* or flag is the symbol of their religious identity. The red body is the symbol of power whereas the white border of peace. *Nishan* has become besides *dankha* an easily recognizable symbol of

Matuas. With a slightest view of rows of *nishans* and the beating of *dankha*, others will come to recognize that Matuas are approaching.



Fig. 14. The researcher is taking interview of Dr. Nandadulal Mahanta who became the first scholar of this community to do a PhD on Matua religion and Dalit movement in 1992. (4th week, December, 2019).

The iconography of Harichand and his wife Shanti Devi cast light on the tradition of idolatry practiced by Matuas. Of course the Buddhist or Christian iconography has a glorious tradition ranging more than two millenniums the legacy of Harichand led his followers to acknowledge him as their savior. This belief among the followers invented this practice of idolatry where they build the twin clay or plaster-made statue of Harichand and his wife and place them in their *thakur ghor*. Since Harichand and his wife are historical figures, their idolatry is different from the idolatry of Hindus who build idols of imaginary gods and goddesses largely

drawn from their myths and legends and immerse them in the water. If Harichand and his wife are the origin of this new faith then one thing has to be understood that Matuaism is quite different from idolatry of Hinduism and on the ground of comparison it has its iconographical similarity with Buddhism in Indian tradition. To millions who have not seen them physically the iconography seems to them to be the symbolic embodiment of their living presence. If we closely examine the banner the members of a *dol* are carrying, the portraits of Harichand and his wife are seen engraved on it. In a Matua temple the iconography is static; but the banner carries them from one place to another. In this case it is mobile or dynamic. In both the cases the symbolic function seems very transparent.

Any organized religion is primarily an organized mass sharing same faith in a divine being, same ritualistic practices dedicated to this divinity, same religious disciplines meant for seeking the grace of this divinity in an ordered, systematic behavior, a common fellow-feeling for all members of its religious group, and a daily observances after its prescribed calendar. All of these qualities are centered on the people who follow it. In other words without the concerned people the existence of an organized religion seems illogical. If we focus on the concerned people sharing same religious heritage it implicitly makes sense that all of them share a common experience, a homogenous religious sentiment, strong and pervasive among all. It is the core of their community-based identity as a whole. The rise and development of Matua religious reform under the leadership of Harichand Thakur in the second half of nineteenth century led the similar sort of common experience among the large group of people commonly looked down upon as lower caste in the hierarchically structure of Vedic Brahminism in Bengal before nineteenth century reformist movements among them. In this respect, formation of a *dol*, hoisting *nishan*,

beating *dankha* and *kasar* and marching ahead with *Horibol* become a symbol of Chandal-turned-Namasudra community's process of a non-Hindu identity formation.

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Chapter Three

Resistance in Rituals and Songs

The definition of resistance in Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “an act or instance of resisting; a means of resisting.”⁷³ In the act of resistance there are two contradictory sides: the doer who is resisting and the authority against whom the resistance is being shown. It focuses on a strongly engaged activism trying to destabilize the concept and mechanism of hegemony or domination whether religious, social, cultural, or political. Since the period of Protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century resistance has grown as a seminal concept to address social transformation as well as mass protests in social sciences and humanities. It has been conceptualized in the discourse of political and social theories in the following way: “Resistance theory is an aspect of political thought, discussing the basis on which constituted authority may be resisted, by individuals or groups.”⁷⁴ In other words, resistance is a counter action against an oppressive system or authority whether religious, social, economic, or political. The third chapter follows the following outline for explicating the application of resistance in selected rituals and songs: contextualization of resistance in social and political thoughts; resistance in cultural studies as a counter response to cultural hegemony; resistance in the emergence of Dalit discourse in India; ritual studies and resistance; contextualization of resistance in the select rituals and songs of Chandal-turned-Namasudra community.

When Rohith Chakravarti Vemula, a PhD scholar of Sociology at University of Hyderabad, India committed suicide on 17th January, 2016 after he faced caste discrimination in the hands of faculty as well as the university authority, the University and the entire country’s

⁷³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resistance>

⁷⁴ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resistance_theory_in_theearly_Modern_period

academic establishment faced the charge of institutional casteism. Rohith, a brilliant scholar, a voracious reader of revolutionary Dalit literature and an active member of Ambedkar Student Association (ASA), left behind his suicide note. Important sections from it will help us understand the identity crisis he was going through in the institutional hegemony. Rohith writes: “The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made of stardust... My birth is my fatal accident.”⁷⁵ Rohith’s suicide sparked a pan-Indian protest against caste discrimination practiced in academic institutes. BBC reported: “Though he did not blame anyone for his death, the [entire] contents of the letter show that he was upset over the discrimination shown to Dalits like him.”⁷⁶ Dalit students, writers and activists across the country held mass protest and political resistance by claiming that suicide of Rohith is a hallmark of caste discrimination in 21st century India. This single incident has shaped contemporary Dalit resistance in literature, politics, and culture immeasurably. Thousands of poems, memoirs, and sketches have made Rohith a martyr, a symbol of ‘Dalit resistance and rights.’

This chapter begins with the reference of Rohith Vemula for two specific reasons: first, understanding institution and power for sustaining hegemony, and second, understanding resistance as the inevitably accepted tool to fight back. In other words, resistance as a counter action is interlinked with hegemony whether political, social or religious. To elucidate the role of power and hegemony and their antagonistic relation with resistance and protest, ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault have been instrumental in theorization. Since resistance is studied in social and political theories as the potent tool to destabilize the oppressive forces as well as to establish a counter cultural identity, Gramsci and Foucault can be a good start.

⁷⁵ <https://m.timesofindia.com/city/hyderabad/full-text-Dalit-scholar-Rohith-Vemulas-suicide>

⁷⁶ <https://www.google.comamp/s/www.bbc.com/news/amp/world=asia-india-35349790>

Michel Foucault (1926-1984), French philosopher and historian of ideas was preoccupied with the role of social institution and its relation with power in most of his writings. In other words, he is well-known as a theorist of power. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978), Foucault writes: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere... power is not an institution, and not a structure... it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (93). Foucault does not see power emanating from “the sovereignty of the state” or from “the law”, rather its dominating presence is “produced from one moment to the next... or rather in every relation from one point to another” (93). To Foucault, power is more of a performance which is to be found everywhere. In this sense power is inextricably related to our daily chores of life. In *Power/Knowledge* (1980) Foucault writes “Power must be analysed as something which articulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain... Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (98). Sara Mills summarizes the power Foucault formulates in the following way: “... power is conceptualized as a chain or as a net... And... individuals should not be seen simply as the recipients of power, but as the ‘place’ where it is resisted... Power needs to be seen as something which has to be constantly performed rather than being achieved” (35). Power has a diverse field and larger space to play its part and not restricted “within particular institutions such as the state or the government” (Mills 35). So far discussed power is traceable in everywhere, among all, even among the marginalized. But when it comes to its applied methodology, we encounter the dominant presence of ruling establishment in any society. Taking an inclusionary perspectives Foucault sees power despite being all-pervasive forming a dominant position in the hand of those who enjoy political and cultural privilege.

But Foucault argues that power gives resistance a simultaneous argumentative and applied validity in the sense that resistance sees power and its oppressive application by any oppressive group as the starting point of its emergence. Foucault writes “Where there is power, there is resistance... a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary target, support, or handle in power relation. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network... there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case” (95-96). Since power is dislocated from powerful organizations and placed it in the wider social arena, non-powerful groups of people do have equal scope to search for the root of their own counter resources with the help of which they can resist the oppressive use of power by the dominant. To explain Foucauldian paradigm of resistance Marcus Schulzke observes: “However, by dislocating power and making it pervasive, Foucault makes it potentially accessible to those who are outside of the dominant political class” (61). Following Foucauldian theoretical paradigm it is argued that the demonstration of protest and public outrage by Dalits after the suicide of Rohith Vemula is a rightful resistance against the oppressive exercise of power by the authority of the University of Hyderabad.

If Foucault formulates his theory of power and contextualizes resistance therein, Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) theorizes the concept of cultural hegemony and a theory of resistance through political activism in his writings. Foucault’s theory of power and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and the role of subalterns to counter the hegemony can be brought together to make a composite theoretical texture to justify resistance as the most productive instrument in social and cultural movement.

Hegemony is a widely applied term in Marxist political theory to understand the political and cultural dominance by ruling class upon the weaker sections of the society. Based on the

Marxist binary of base and superstructure, hegemony is seen as a potential tool of the superstructure to dominate the subordinate groups of people. But Antonio Gramsci deviates from the traditional Marxist understanding of hegemony and interprets anew.

If superstructure is the main workshop of wielding cultural hegemony, intellectuals seem to occupy the most important place therein. Based on his study of intellectuals Gramsci divides them into two categories: traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Organic intellectuals are distinguished from traditional intellectuals in the sense that the former must take active part “in the struggle for hegemony to be ‘directive’ as well as ‘specialized’. To achieve this, the organic intellectuals must be able to elaborate their specialist knowledge into political knowledge... the organic intellectual must actively participate in practical life ‘as constructor, organizer... and not just a simple orator’” (Gramsci 10). In other words, traditional intellectuals despite their specialization in respective discipline withdraw themselves from *politically engaged life*. According to Gramsci, organic intellectuals play more actively than their traditional counterpart to determine the fate of cultural hegemony of the ruling class. Gramsci divides the superstructure into two groups too: civil society and political society. Civil society includes academic and cultural institutes, media, printing industries, clubs and so on; political society includes administrative bodies, governments, civil and criminal courts, military force and so on. In both groups organic intellectuals play a proactive role to consolidate the narrative of cultural hegemony. Terry Eagleton interprets Gramscian hegemony “as a whole range of practical strategies by which a dominant power elicits consent to its rule from those [it] subjugates. To win hegemony... is to establish moral, political and intellectual leadership in social life by diffusing one’s own ‘world view’ throughout the fabric of the society as a whole” (115-16).

The position of subaltern people in the hegemonic fabric of a society remains another widely discussed issue in the writings of Gramsci. The dominance of ruling class through the hegemonic institutions corners the subaltern people. Subaltern means those people who remain dominated by the ruling class. Gramsci writes “The subaltern class, by definition, are not united until they are able to become a “State”: their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States” (52). If they are not united they remain vulnerable in the hand of ruling classes. “There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to unification in the historical activity of the groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups” (55). But Gramsci puts forward his thoughts on the concept of resistance that subaltern groups inevitably put in exercise to ascertain their political and cultural identity despite the aforementioned ruling class interference. ‘Philosophy of praxis’ is primarily meant for action. But its inception rests on pragmatic orientation. In simple words, the subaltern groups must understand the importance of political action to be initiated by their own mass power first and formulate a body of organic intellectuals with the help of the available intellectual resources of their subaltern society thereafter, so that their organic intellectuals can accelerate the pace of resistance against the dominant or hegemonic power. Gramsci observes: “One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is [that it] succeeds in... elaborating its own organic intellectuals” (10). It means this might be the same mechanism for the subaltern people to organize their own organic intellectuals to fight back. In this respect, in response to the suicide of Rohith Vamula, Dalit political organizations’ resistant demonstrations through street protests and strikes on the one hand, and the formation of Dalit student organizations named after great social crusaders, such as Ambedkar and Phule at

different universities on the other are rightful resistance to be justified from Gramscian perspective.

The concepts of power and hegemony therefore remain fundamental to understand many political, social, and cultural movements across the world. Many cultural and political reforms have taken place in different times in both West and East, such as the Protestant resistance against Catholic orthodoxy in 16th century Europe; the Civil Rights movement by African Americans against White American cultural and political domination in 1860s and 1960s in America; the Chandal Movement of 1872-73 by Chandals in colonial Bengal; the Mahad Satyagraha by Dalit-bahujans to achieve their right to drink water from public tank at Mahad in 1920s under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar; and Dalit Panther movement by Dalit-bahujans of Maharashtra against upper caste-led political and economic discriminations in 1970s in India. All of these resistant phenomena are studied as examples of engaged political and cultural activisms to put the oppressive force upside down. To study resistance and its shaping influence behind emergence and canonization of cultures of marginalized groups of people across the globe, such as African Americans or Native Americans in USA or Dalit-bahujans in India, Cultural studies is academically more professional to cater for this phenomenon.

The emergence of Cultural studies can be interpreted as a Postmodern phenomenon. The Postmodern philosophy destabilizes the dominant grand narratives or macro-narratives of human culture and brings onto surface many fragmentations or micro-narratives where the voice of new cultures are heard instead of an all-pervading Cultural voice of any dominant class, race or caste. The decline of major European powers like Britain and the initiation of postcolonial turn in global politics helped many marginalized communities or nations rise up with their own cultural narrative, from the erstwhile colonies in particular. The emergence of Cultural studies as a

distinct academic discourse contextualizes resistance and politics of cultural dominance on the one hand and puts it in wider disciplinary exercise to justify the utterance of marginal voice on the other.

The foundation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) by Richard Hoggart (1918-2014) in 1964 at Birmingham University is a pioneering effort to make Cultural Studies a distinct discipline. Hoggart, Raymond Williams (1921-1988), E.P. Thompson (1924-1993) Stuart Hall (1932-2014) are credited with being the founding figures of British Cultural Studies. Cultural studies being an established discipline across universities centers its theoretical and applied documentations on *culture* and its pervasive impact upon human life and environment as well as the political dimension of its exercise across societies. Stuart Hall summarizes the essence and temperament of this new discipline in the following way:

In the aftermath of World War II British society and culture were changing very rapidly and fundamentally. Cultural studies provided answers to the long process of Britain's decline as a world superpower. It also investigated the impact of modern mass consumption and modern mass society; the Americanization of our culture; the postwar expansion of the new means of mass communication; the birth of youth culture... of... new social relationships. (337)

A range of disciplines have contributed towards making culture an invaluable concept in human civilization, such as anthropology, literary studies, philosophy, history, sociology, linguistics, media studies, psychoanalysis and so on. Raymond Williams briefed the transitional phase of the meaning and understanding of culture over the last two hundred years in his seminal work *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (1958) in the following way: "It came to mean, first, 'a

general state or habit of the mind’... Second... the general state of the intellectual development, in a society as a whole’. Third... ‘the general body of the arts’. Fourth, later in the century... ‘a way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual” (xiv). Williams being a Marxist thinker appeared quite vocal in terms of disseminating the cultural narrative in post-War, Postmodern world of cultural politics which is critiqued to be capitalist cultural politics. Working class people became the new site of investigation in the newly founded Centre at Birmingham. Alongside *Culture and Society* it has its disciplinary and theoretical orientation in Richard Hoggart’s seminal work *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of working-class life, with special references to publications and entertainments* (1957) that documents rich heritage of the working class life in British society. Ranging from their settlement, food and clothes to their sports, rituals, songs and music, Hoggart establishes in his description a working class or underprivileged root of culture instead of the elite British culture. Their way of life is merged “... in speech, in forms of culture (the Working-Men’s Clubs, the styles of singing, the brass bands... the close group of games like darts and dominoes) and in attitudes as they are expressed in everyday life” (265). This close study of working class life (and not an elite class) remains the initial step to formulate a theory of ‘cultural turn’ in Cultural studies. Stuart Hall says: “Culture did not consist of free-floating ideas; it had to be understood as embodied in social practices... that ‘way of life’ had to be studied in and for themselves... to understand cultural change” (25).

On the note of cultural change it is to be noted that culture does not introduce any homogenous, complete, and universal ‘way of life’; rather expressions like ‘our culture’ or ‘their culture’ split it up into multiple fractions that are traceable in the life of each small community or tribe. When Frantz Fanon talks about ‘national culture’ in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he contextualizes it in the life of Negroes who are not a homogenous people with Europeans; when

W. E. B. Du Bois addresses his polemic, he contextualizes the African Americans who do not share same cultural platform with White Americans; Ambedkar converts to Buddhism with the aim of rediscovering Buddhist culture for his fellow marginalized people who have been suffering from all sorts of injustices under the banner of Hindu culture; and when a Dalit-bahujan community of West Bengal, such as Chandal-turned-Namasudra organizes their cultural event with traditional rituals and music, it becomes a distinct narrative of their own adaptation of culture too. Therefore, culture is universal as well as local; homogenous as well as heterogeneous. Cultural practices are hegemonic such as European culture in relation to Africans or White American culture in relation to African Americans or Brahminical culture in relation to Dalit-bahujans in India; but cultural practices or representations are resistant too: the African American resistant articulation in the face of White American hegemony and Dalit-bahujan resistant articulation in the face of Brahminical hegemony in India. In this resistant activism the identity of each community and its members seem to be well articulated. Therefore, Cultural studies gives the study of identity politics its validity as well.

Identity politics is not an isolated part of cultural studies rather it is a social need, an essential aspect of survival especially of those who are marginalized, such as Dalit-bahujans in India. The need of identity politics is felt by marginalized people because it is by raising their identity and a subsequent unification that they can bring together all members of their community and make their political and cultural resistance vocal. Simon During writes: “Identities are not just given or chosen, they have to be enacted, but this means that they have to enter into negotiation with the situation in which they are performed or otherwise acted upon” (151). Despite some negotiations, seen from the side of marginalized, identity politics is a counter response to hegemonic group that with the help of power both political and cultural

subjugates them. The theoretical platform behind identity politics in Cultural studies is hegemony and resistance. To powerful it is hegemony and to marginalize it is resistance. The Black Panther movement in America in 1960s and the Dalit Panther movement in India in 1970s are two very sound examples of politico-cultural movements that celebrate their respective identities through different means including street protest, songs, street drama, protest ritual or counter ritual, and literary and academic initiatives. In this sense Cultural studies not only pioneered the study of marginalized group of people and their culture but also theorized the importance of resistance as the most productive means of the re-assertion of their respective identity in a hegemonic society.

In social and cultural movements across the world the concept resistance is quite combined with the concept of social conflict that lies at the root of the entire discourse. Social conflict establishes a binary of ruling/ruled, privileged/underprivileged or marginalized in a social setting. As an applied aspect of resistance it involves a set of mechanisms having important paradigms, such as conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; and a distinct collective identity (Porta and Diani 20). Both groups want to retain their respective ideological positions. Seen from the perspectives of marginalized it is quite understandable that their attempt to destabilize the hegemonic group is a politically and socially committed action that can be called an example of collective behavior. Collective behavior as Neil Smelser theorizes in his *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962) has six essential determinants two of them are: spread of generalized beliefs; and mobilization for action (Porta and Diani 33). Smelser gives a simplified definition of collective behavior: “mobilization on the basis of a belief which redefines social action” (8). In this sense collective behavior, whether a street protest, or political procession and slogans, or panic-stricken crowd, or excited audience in a concert hall is

primarily meant for a composition of specific ‘acts.’ Resistance therefore is such an ‘act’ guided by a commonly shared ideology and a completely political mobilization meant for terminating the force of oppression in any social context.

As explained in the previous chapter ritualistic practices are a certain kind of social action inclined to symbolic orientation, the sign of resistance seems to be inherent there too. Since rituals and songs are inseparable part of a community’s cultural articulation, the relation between ritualistic performances and resistance in the case of a marginalized community gives us a fair idea of how does it work: its resistant relation with the hegemonic society’s ritualistic dominance on the one hand and a subtle development of self-made cultural narrative of their community on the other. In the present research the selected rituals and songs of Chandra-turned-Namasudra community are well-organized cultural practices that amply demonstrate resistance against Brahminical ritualistic hegemony in Bengali society. The emergence of Matua religion among Chandals of undivided Bengal in the second half of nineteenth century laid down the foundation of a protestant phenomenon that bears an antagonistic relation to that of Vedic Brahminism prevailing in Bengal since Sena dynasty; and besides the symbolic implication, the ritualistic practices of Matua religion do represent the very essence of resistance therein too.

The rise of Chandal-turned-Namasudra community is not an isolated social, political, and cultural phenomenon in the second half of nineteenth century in Bengal, rather it has to be seen as an integral part of a pan-Indian Dalit emergence in the colonial period. Although the word ‘Dalit’⁷⁷ is quite new in the discursive usage, thousands of marginalized groups of people who are introduced as Asur, Rakshasa, Danav, Dasyu, Chandal, Achhut, Sudra, ati-Sudra, Adivasi in

⁷⁷ It was first used in modern parlance by an army officer of East India Company, J. J. Molesworth in a Marathi-English dictionary in 1831.

Brahminical sourcebooks emerged as a homogenous collective population sharing a common ideology which has two fundamental theoretical hypothesis: *they all are indigenous groups of people of India who have been colonized by Aryan invaders long before the arrival of European colonial powers; and the Aryans known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas (the Rigveda and other Sanskrit texts such as the Manusmriti certify all these neologisms mentioned) popularized the notion of 'freedom movement' in the British colonial rule only to capture the power from English rulers so that they could rule over the indigenous groups again.* Swami Dharma Theertha traces the root of the Brahminical Imperialism (Hindu Imperialism) by going back to the time of Rigveda and continues his polemic till contemporary time when the transfer of power from British government to Brahminical Imperialists⁷⁸ got finally accomplished on 15th August 1947. The central argument of his seminal book *History of Hindu Imperialism* (1941) rests upon this native/foreign divide⁷⁹ on the one hand and the use of resistance, protest, and rebellion to dismantle the Brahminical hegemony on the other.

The pre-colonial India is said to be a pre-modern society dominated by Vedic Brahminism, a dominant oppressive system that theorizes the superiority of Brahmins and other upper castes over certain other castes and communities, such as Sudra, ati-Sudra, and untouchables (Aloysius 10). The advent of Western powers heralded the dawn of modernity the invincible instruments of which were English education, industrial and commercial enterprise,

⁷⁸ The emergence of contemporary Dalit-bahujan activism in politics and cultural affairs in India takes its side on Aryan Invasion theory and formulates a specific indigenous political as well as cultural narrative the base of which is 'fifteen percent versus eighty-five percent', that means the Brahmins and other upper castes who constitute around fifteen percent of Indian population do carry the Aryan imperial legacy since the time of the Rigveda; on the contrary, the Dalit-bahujans, namely Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) constitute the native, indigenous people constitute the majority eighty-five percent of the population. In this logic, post-1947 India has been primarily a colony of Brahminical Imperialism in which Dalit-bahujans are the colonized.

⁷⁹ Unlike the Postcolonial narrative identifying Europeans as foreigners and Indians native, the Dalit-bahujan critique of Brahminical Imperialism argues that Brahmins and other upper castes (15 percent) are foreigners whereas the Dalit-bahujans (85 percent) are natives, hence heralding a new dimension and debate in the study of Indian political and social history. Swami Dharma Theertha is one of the earliest proponents of the Brahminical Imperialism in his aforementioned book.

spread of Christianity, foundation of printing press and certainly a Western culture and life style. The shift from non-democratic, old, superstitious, caste-based discriminatory society to democratic, modern, rational society under British rule in the colonial period heralded a new beginning in the life of Dalit-bahujans. This paradigm shift takes its shape in two broad routes: religio-cultural and politico-economic (Aloysius 14-15). Both of the routes have influenced the Dalit-bahujan emergence in India in two channels: one, the spread of education among thousands of Dalit-bahujan castes and tribes by Christian missionaries and the benevolent British rule; and second, the rise of social and religious reformers among them; and both channels are interconnected. These channels open up two epistemic sources to know about the glorious cultural past of Dalit-bahujans: one, the revival of Buddhism in almost all parts of India; and second, the archeological findings of ancient civilizations, the Buddhist relics by Alexander Cunningham in particular. All four factors substantiate the argument that the emergence of millions of Dalit-bahujans who have been marginalized in Indian society by Vedic Brahminism is perhaps a watershed in the history of modern India.

The British Imperialism, according to Indian nationalists (Brahmins and other upper castes who founded The Indian National Congress in 1885) was a curse, an era of darkness (Tharur 2018), exploiting Indians through economic and administrative policies by implementing 'divide and rule' policy throughout their two-century old Imperial dominance. But to Dalit-bahujans who got access to education officially for the first time in their homeland in British period have understood that Vedic Brahminism injected the 'divide and rule' policy among thousands of indigenous non-Aryan people in India so as to divide them into thousands of inter-conflicting castes and tribes that would help them rule over this land. Dalit-bahujan scholars acknowledged after becoming educated and rational that the British policies in education,

administrative representation, and social reforms were boons to them. Satyanarayana and Tharu argue that British colonialism initiated “missionary activity, which included the setting up of educational institutions and hospitals as well as conversions, reforms of many social practices, the emergence of public spaces that were accessible to all, the introduction of modern life and rule of law” (10). To thousands of marginalized castes and tribes these missionary activities were measures for emancipation because the pre-colonial Brahminical regime prevented them to have access to all of these rights. The marginalized sections made the best use of the missionary enterprise. “They invoked the normative ideas of equality and modernity, made use of colonial educational institutions, converted to Christianity, and organized their communities as religious and social pressure groups” (Satyanarayana and Tharu 10). Along with it came the role of religious and social reformers who were born in the marginalized communities and sought to challenge Brahminical hegemony on the one hand and reorganize their own mass as a militant group on the other. Although the first census in 1872⁸⁰ officially recorded the names of thousands of castes and tribes in government papers, each community or tribe with their respective names (despite derogatory meaning it has been given by the texts of Vedic Brahminism) emerged as rebellious groups with their own indigenous resources.

The rise of Chandal-turned-Namasudras can be compared to the rise of Mahars in Maharashtra, Maadigaas in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana, Adi Dravida in Tamil Nadu, Chamar

⁸⁰ The entire colonial historiography upheld by Indians can be divided into two opposite schools: Gandhian and Ambedkarite. The former rests upon the theoretical hypothesis that despite some internal conflicts India has been fostering an unbreakable chain of cultural tie as well as a perfect balance since the time of Vedas, which is better known as Hindu culture (Sanatan culture). On the contrary, the latter foregrounds its theoretical hypothesis that India has never been a homogenous, unbreakable, continuous civilization, rather it has so many fractions, conflicts, wars, and more surprisingly religious, social, and political divides the invincible weapon of which is caste system, hence a supposed Hindu culture is an illusion. The former identifies its root in Sanskrit-based Hindu cultural heritage; on the contrary the latter takes pride in Pali and Prakrit-based Buddhist cultural heritage. See Nagaraj, D. R. *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India*. Bangalore, South Forum Press, 1993; Ilaiah, Kancha. *God as Political Philosopher: Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism*. Kolkata, Samya, 2001; Omvedt, Gail. *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. Hyderabad, Orient BlackSwan, 2011.

in Uttar Pradesh, and Ad Dharmi in Punjab. All of these marginalized castes took the best services of the 'missionary activity' of British colonialism and emerged as powerfully organized social force in the colonial period. The fundamental spirit behind their unification is resistance against Brahminical hegemony.

There are two complimentary tendencies in the entire Chandal-turned-Namasudra emergence: one the religious movement and the other social and educational movement. The religious movement emerged first around 1840s under the leadership of Harichand Thakur and continued till his death in 1878. The social and educational movement was the offspring of the religious movement and handed over to his worthy son Guruchand Thakur. Guruchand died in 1937 and till his last breath served as the great patriarch, an authority of entire movement and the Dalit emergence in undivided Bengal. This time line thus can be periodized into two major phases: 1812-1878 or Harichand era and 1878-1937 or Guruchand era. Both of the phases are inextricably tied up with each other. The two texts written in Bangla, *Sri Sri Harililamrita* (The Miracles of Sri Harichand) by Tarak Chandra Sarkar, a devotee of Harichand, first published in 1916 and *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* (The Narrative of the Life of Sri Guruchand) by Mahananda Haldar, a poet and witness of Guruchand's later part of life, published in 1943 remain the fundamental source books to gain knowledge about the religious, social, and political aspects of the entire Dalit-bahujan emergence in Bengal as well as the community's cultural representation.

Since the perpetual conflict between Vedic Brahminism and anti-Brahminical movements is the bedrock of entire Dalit-bahujan resurgence in the colonial period, Matua religious movement theoretically justifies a new theological orientation, that is, it seeks an alternative religious identity the base of which is morality. Conversion to Buddhism or Islam is of course a very productive tool in the hand of marginalized groups who have been forcefully identified as

Hindu to terminate their link with entire Hindu culture. But Harichand did not introduce conversion to Buddhism among millions of his Chandal followers the way Iyothee Thass did with Adi-Dravidas in Tamil Nadu or Ambedkar with his Mahars in Maharashtra. Rather he introduced a new name Matua (*this Bangla word means 'devoted and spiritually saturated in the name of Harichand'*) and uttered Twelve Commandments⁸¹ for his followers to follow. All commandments reflect upon moral behavior of a Matua follower. The fifth commandment says: *Do not indulge in castiest behavior with anyone*; the sixth commandment says: *Always stay away from the six carnal sins*; and the seventh commandment says: *Do not disrespect other religions*. These three along with other nine are bearer of a moral behavior-oriented teachings imparted among marginalized groups. Manosanta Biswas explains the essence of Matuaism in the following: "In Matua religion, the god and Hari, himself is considered as human being and for that reason services to the humanity and the creatures around is considered as the ultimate religion" (370). Here the Hari is obviously Harichand himself. The Twelve Commandments therefore reflect upon this humanism. In the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* there are important passages that reflect upon two theoretical paradigms of his teachings: one denying the authority of *Vedas* and *Manusmriti*, and the other acknowledging a Buddhist lineage. The following excerpts of *Harililamrita* are translated into English from original Bangla by the researcher to substantiate its denial of Hindu lineage and acknowledgment of its Buddhist lineage. Harichand strongly denounces the Vedic authority by saying: "We are ready to eat the remaining of a dog's food,/ But no longer ready to obey the customs and rituals of the Vedas" (Sarkar 138). His criticism of Brahmins and Vaishnavas is well known: "Where do you find a Brahmin and a Vaishnava?/ All of them are opportunistic and money-hunger, all of them are fake" (Sarkar 94). In these three excerpts one thing gets clarified quite well, that is, Harichand is denying the authority of Hindu

⁸¹ See Halder, Nityananda. *Harichander Dwadeshagya*. Thakur Nagar, Matua Mahasangha, p. 41.

scriptures on the one hand and rejecting the caste-based Hindu social structure on the other. It is recorded in the *Harililamrita* that Harichand's family were followers of Vaishnavism. This claim seems invalid for two specific reasons. First, Harichand and his community were known as Chandals in the Castiest society of Bengal and according to Manusmriti, Chandals do not belong to the fourfold division of Hindu society, rather they belong to 'untouchable' (Ati-Sudra) groups of people; in other words, a Chandal's status is lower than a Sudra. Manusmriti prescribes the status of a Chandal in the following way: "Chandals and Svapacas, however, must live outside the village and they should be made Apapatras. Their property consists of dogs and donkeys; their garments are the clothes of the dead; they eat in broken vessels; their ornaments are of iron; and they constantly roam about" (Olivelle 210). Based on this argument it seems impossible that Harichand and his family could have any religious rights at all in the Vaishnava or greater Hindu culture dominated by Brahmins and other upper castes. In other words, although Tarak Chandra Sarkar gives a reference of his family's Vaishnava link, in the field of execution of the rights it does not come any closer to the logic. The second reason is, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, grandson of Guruchand Thakur writes in his autobiography *Atmacharit ba Purbbosmriti* (1995) that one Ramdas Mishra, the earliest known ancestor of Harichand's family dated back to 16th century was a Brahmin. Since he arranged the marriage of his son Chandramohan with a Chandal girl, his family lost the status of Brahminhood (1-2). He draws a conclusion that his ancestors although lost the purity of Brahmin status, carried a Brahmin lineage in their blood that got transmitted to Harichand and his descendents. If we rely upon what P. R. Thakur writes, two things are to be clarified: one, Harichand and his family's Brahmin status and the other, thousands of Chandal families' indigenous status. In this respect, Harichand and his family members are non-Chandals or outsiders to the native Chandals. But *Guruchand Charit*, the most

authoritative text on the historical, social, and political matters rejects the former's claim of a Brahmin link by saying Namasudras were Buddhists. On the issue of non-Brahminical orientation, Manosanta Biswas argues: "... we would observe that their religious ideologies were free from Brahministic influence and scripture directed conservatism" (370). Therefore, one can draw two conclusions: one, Chandals who came to be known as Namasudras were primarily a large agrarian indigenous people of the lower Gangetic plain who professed Buddhism⁸²; and second, Harichand and his family were neither followers of Vaishnava tradition nor a part greater Hindu culture at all.

On the other side, there are some celebrated excerpts establishing an ideological kinship of Matua religion with Buddhism. The poet Tarak Chandra Sarkar writes: "To fulfill the aspiration of the Buddha,/ Harichand was born in the abode of Yashamanta" (40). In another place Harichand is said to have reconciled his teachings with Buddha: "Lord Buddha blesses all the downtrodden,/... All the Sudras [Namasudras] became fortunate to be blessed" (Sarkar 40). The Matua religious movement therefore destabilizes the Vedic authority and Brahminical hegemony on the one hand and establishes an ideological kinship with Buddha and his moral teachings on the other. Selected famous sayings can strengthen the argument that Harichand's teachings are charged with the moral behavior: "Sympathy to all creatures, modesty in behavior, and respect to all humans,/ Any other work besides them are certain failure (Sarkar 23); and "There is no fault to stay at your home,/ Keep your character clean and speak the truth./ Speak the truth and maintain your family,/ Work at hand and devotion in speech will keep your heart open" (Sarkar 98). The revival of Buddhism in the colonial period is one of the fundamental achievements of the Dalit-bahujan emergence. Millions of marginalized groups recognized the

⁸² This aspect of their status has been elaborated in the first chapter. See page no. 11 to 17.

greatness of Buddha's teachings of equality, morality, and rationality. Initiated by the great archeologists and Indologists such as Alexander Cunningham, James Princep, T. W. Rhys Davids through their excavations and scholarly pursuit, Buddhism marked its entrance onto the stage after a long period of absence. Prof. Gail Ombevt summarizes the marginalized people's Buddhist orientation: "One of the remarkable features of all low-caste movements from the 19th century was the search for an alternate dharma... Beginning with the role played by Jotiba Phule, [their search for] equalitarian religion... climaxed, at the close of the 19th century, with Buddhism" (224-25). Iyothee Thass (1845-1915) of Tamil Nadu, Anagarika Dhammapala (1864-1933) of Sri Lanka, Kripaswaran Mahastavir (1865-1927) of Bengal pioneered the revival of Buddhism in their respective ways. But it was Dr. Ambedkar who became the ultimate champion of Buddhist revivalism. Writing in *Annihilation of Caste* (1935), Dr. Ambedkar exposed the inhuman machinery called Caste system and its 'graded inequality' in Hindu religion and declared that "You must make your efforts to uproot caste... I am sorry, I will not be with you. I have decided to change" (80); he made it clear the Buddhism is the only religion that can guarantee equality, liberty and fraternity to 'Depressed classes.' In a letter written on 16th February, 1955 to the General Secretary of the Mahabodhi Society, Calcutta Dr. Ambedkar expressed his willingness to conversion (430). On 14th October, 1956, he along with millions of his followers renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. Although Harichand did not choose conversion to Buddhism as the secured fate of millions of Chandals, he as quoted above sought to tie up his teachings with that of the Buddha. Therefore, we can draw a conclusion that Matua religion represents a non-Hindu identity and cultural heritage.

The second tendency of the Namasudra emergence is social and educational movement. After the death of Harichand in 1878, his worthy son Guruchand took over the responsibility of

the emergence. Guruchand understood the importance of education, business, politics and general social awareness among his subject. Since his fellow people were peasants, fishers, carpenters, pot makers, and doers of all other manual works, he felt the need of school to be set up for spreading education; and without education the entire community would always remain at the lowest strata of the society and serve as eternal slaves in the Brahminical society. There are a great number of landmark achievements in the entire Guruchand era: the first general strike by Chandals in Faridpur and other adjacent Chandal-populated districts in East Bengal in 1872-73 (although Harichand was alive at that time, the spirit of this strike had a far-reaching impact on thirty-seven years old Guruchand); the first public meeting of Chandals in the house compound of one Iswar Chandra Gayen at Duttadanga, Khulna in 1881; Guruchand's active initiative in promoting the importance of education among fellow Chandals and founding elementary schools in almost every village, whether it was a cowshed or a veranda in any house compound; the arrival of Australian Baptist missionary and physician Cesil Silas Mead (1864-1940) at Faridpur in 1893 and his meeting with Guruchand around 1905; Guruchand's refusal to Surendranath Banerjee in participating 1905 Swadeshi movement; the foundation of Orakandi High School in 1908; Guruchand's visit to the office of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in 1907 and his appeal to the government to provide government jobs to eligible educated candidates of his community; the publication of *Namasudra-Suhrid*, first ever literary journal in 1907; the emergence of first generation English-educated youths and their participation in all aspects of life, ranging from government jobs to politics, from academics to literature; rise of prominent literary, public and political figures such as Raicharan Biswas, Jogendranath Mandal, Mukunda Bihari Mallik; the foundation of All-Bengal Namasudra Association and All-Bengal Depressed Classes Association in 1920s; the rise of Dalit-bahujan politics, Jogendranath Mandal, and

Bengal Scheduled Castes’ historic role in helping Dr. Ambedkar to win the seat in the Constituent Assembly in 1946—in other words, the entire Guruchand era (1878-1937) was the most eventful as well as productive period in the entire Dalit-bahujan emergence of Bengal. And *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* by the great poet Mahananda Haldar faithfully chronicles this golden ‘Guruchand era.’ On the historical importance of Guruchand’s leadership, Manohar Mouli Biswas observes Guruchand’s leadership “helped to unite the Namashudras, while on the other hand it provided encouragement to the other oppressed groups to rise to the occasion of self-consciousness” (233).

There are great sayings of Guruchand that reflect upon the concept of resistance as the bedrock of Chandal-turned-Namasudras’ engaged social and political affairs in contemporary history of Bengal. As said earlier, education was his first priority. He is said to have visited every villages of Chandals, and other marginalized communities and preached his gospels of education and social awareness. Guruchand says “Let me command you, if you obey me,/ There mustn’t be any uneducated child in your house./ There is no regret if you are hungry,/ You must ensure the education of your child” (Haldar 144); he affirms his moral and ideological orientation in the following rhetoric: “My father told me with a clarion call,/ To spread education among the people./ Think there is nothing worth without it,/ With education you can achieve both wealth and respect” (Haldar 108). His clarion call for education movement included almost all marginalized communities of Bengal: “Namasudra, Teli, Mali and Kumbhakar,/ Kapali, Mahishya, Das, Chamar, Kamar./ Pod, and Tati, and Malakar⁸³ come too,/ How many Muslims come no one counts” (Haldar 144). His understanding of social reality, that is, the deep-rooted

⁸³ These are the names Brahmins and other upper castes invented and then attributed with contemptuous and derogatory meaning to address many marginalized groups of people in Bengal. The Chandal-turned-Namasudra movement sought to integrate all marginalized groups and turn this social integration into a vibrant and revolutionary force to fight with Brahmins and other upper castes with the aim of uprooting caste system and eradicate other sorts of social discriminations.

caste-based social, economic, political injustice and discrimination inflicted upon marginalized communities led him preach the teachings of social and political unity among his people: “The king is the supreme among all,/ How can a race emerge without the royal power” (Halder 146). A close reading of his revolutionary gospels authenticates resistance as the essential orientation of thoughts among them to fight against Brahminism in the caste-based hierarchical society of Bengal on the one hand and cemented the bedrock of social and political integration among thousands of Chandal-turned-Namasudras and other Dalit-bahujan communities on the other.

Since resistance is the central theme to be explicated in this chapter, the concept of resistance in Cultural studies as well as in the Foucauldian and Gramscian discourse helps contextualize it as a counter action in the case study of marginalized communities. This is the point of entry in the study of the pan-Indian Dalit-emergence in India in which Namasudras play an equally significant role as the Mahars of Maharashtra, the Adi Dravida of Tamil Nadu, the Chamars of Uttar Pradesh, the Ad Dharmi of Punjab and other great rebellious communities.

This detailed study of the Namasudra emergence overlapping the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century serves as the background of the study of resistance in selected rituals and songs that weave their cultural narrative. In the previous chapter the explication and elucidation of symbol in selected rituals and songs weave the traditional narrative of their cultural heritage. In the present chapter the explication and elucidation of resistance in their rituals and songs will provide us a modern, rational narrative of their cultural heritage.

To resume the interpretation of ritualistic performances whether religious or secular as a set of social behavior, the present chapter gets into the detailed study of select rituals and songs

of Chandal-turned-Namasudra community. The first three folk rituals, *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra* have already been shown as the repository of symbols; but three of them can also be interpreted as means of resistance against the imposition of idolatry of Hindu calendrical festivals, such as *Durga puja*, *Kali puja*, *Saraswati puja* and so on. Although the worship of mother goddess is quite prominent in Bengal, the imagination of a deity having a physical shape and fully armed to kill opponents like Asur, a powerful indigenous king of India seems quite alien to the native tradition of mother goddess celebration. The canonical *Ma Manasha*, the snake goddess who holds very important place in the medieval Bangla literature is imagined in the shape of a snake, not a beautiful woman having four or ten hands and holding a snake. There are innumerable songs composed upon her; these songs praise her so that she does not become rude upon mankind and shower her blessings. In the case of *Manasha* the argument is she belongs to the native pre-Aryan, non-Brahminical cult, representing a long, indigenous tradition of ritualistic practice. On the contrary, worship of mother goddesses like Durga, Kali, Sawaswati and others represent the Aryan, Brahminical cult. Since Bastu and Hanchra are imagined to be the respective goddesses of indigenous Chandal-turned-Namasudra community, they fall in the category of non-Aryan cult. In Indian context, the century-old mortal and ideological battle between Aryans and non-Aryans get reflected in religious beliefs and rituals quintessentially. *Durga puja* which is the symbol of Aryan culture in West Bengal is imposed upon many indigenous groups of people, including Chandal-turned-Namasudra as a sign of cultural hegemony. Since it is predominantly oppressive cultural sign⁸⁴, the revival of Asur festival is a resistant cultural orientation in West Bengal. The celebration of Asur Festival, better known as *Asur Swaran Sabha* (Asur Memorial Ceremony) in different districts of West Bengal, such as

⁸⁴ Mr. Samudra Biswas has given an elaborate account of how oppressive Durga puja is in his book *Durga Pujar Ontorale*, Kolkata, Janamon, 2014. The cultural divide between Aryans and non-Aryans and Durga as the representative of modern Aryan culture in West Bengal has also been authentically discussed.

Malda, Murshidabad, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Purulia, Jhargram, West Medinipur and other districts has become a powerful counter ritualistic practice to destabilize the Brahminical hegemony expressed through Brahminical idolatry throughout the year. Mr. Charan Besra,⁸⁵ a representative of Asur festival gave an interview to the Dalit Camera that was published on 19 January, 2014 on YouTube. According to Mr. Besra, Asur⁸⁶ is one of the non-Aryan kings in ancient India and the Asur is the name of a tribe too. It proves the name of the tribe derives from their king. He says Jharkhand which is known as Tribal state is the land of Asur tribe⁸⁷; but they have been forced to migrate to other states so as to make them economically, socially, and politically vulnerable in the hand of powerful. But Mr. Besra is hopeful that Asur festival will help revive the lost identity and culture of indigenous people in future. By this logic, when we see Chandal-turned-Namasudras celebrating their own goddesses through adopting different forms of natural world amidst a growing trend of idolatry of Brahminical culture in West Bengal, one can draw a conclusion that their ritualistic practices celebrated around a branch of a Jibli tree or a small branch of a ber tree is a show of resistance too.

Since Matua religion emerges as a new religion out of the cobweb of Brahminical hegemony, its ritualistic practices such as *harisabha*, a weekly public gathering in the house of a respectable villager on every Wednesday meant for worshipping Harichand and his wife Shanti Devi can be interpreted as an awareness camp. This religious ritual comprises of singing songs known as *Hari Sangeet*, a distinct genre of devotional song celebrating Harichand and his wife as

⁸⁵ Mr. Charan Besra is a commentator on Asur culture. He holds conferences in different districts in West Bengal and promotes the Asur culture among the indigenous groups of people on respective occasions. His speeches and commentaries on the subject have been telecasted in some YouTube channels, such as ASUR TV, Mulnivasi TV Bangla, Dalit Camera. His commentary quoted in the thesis has been transcribed into English from the respective video clipping of Dalit Camera. See https://youtu.be/KNqTa_Znw_4

⁸⁶ For further study on the indigenous status of Asur people and their glorious civilization, read Biswas, Samudra. *Mahishasur Mohan Asur*. 3rd ed., Kolkata, Janaman, 2017.

⁸⁷ For a detailed view of the Asur people of Jharkhand, see the following documentary released by The Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of Jharkhand. The digital link is <https://youtu.be/OVTjdaPSvXs>

their saviors as well as beating *dankha* along with the singing at the end of the *harisabha*. Apart from their religious ritual discussions on social and political situations are also done at the end. In this sense entire orientation is directed towards socialization and mobilization, in other words, although the Wednesday gathering is meant for religious rituals of Matuas, it values exchange of rational thoughts.

Mahotsav is another ritualistic practice that includes large gathering of people. It is organized in the house of an individual member on specific day; many *dols* are invited to join the ritual on the specific day; *dols* comprising of men, women of all ages walk along the country road and come to the courtyard of the host at morning; the initial stage of the ritual is devoted to beating of *dankha* and doing *matam* for ten to fifteen minutes; the entire courtyard turns into a vibrant space of a strong, unified group of people dancing along with the music; while dancing they hail Harichand by frequently uttering the word *horibal*⁸⁸. After the *matam* gets over, the musical performances start and continue till afternoon; it is followed by a general discussion on social and political aspects of the teachings of Harichand and Guruchand. At evening all participants sit together on rows and enjoy the public feast comprising of vegetarian food, such as *bhat*, *dal*, *ghet*,⁸⁹ and tamarind water. To take a collective view of *mahotsav*, the entire ritual performance is an exhibition of social and cultural solidarity. It involves a community gathering and delivers a message that Matuas are well-organized as well as aware of their religious and other fundamental rights. One thing has to be remembered, that is, Matua religious identity is created to challenge Brahminical hegemony in religious and cultural setting in Bengal. Both

⁸⁸ Haribal literally means ‘utter the name of Harichand.’ Hari and Bal are two words. The last one is a verb meaning ‘say’ or ‘tell.’ But my interpretation of it is Bal as a noun means ‘physical prowess.’ That means, Haribal is an honorary utterance by Matuas to demonstrate that uttering Haribal instills an immense power in the body of the fellow devotees. The utterance of Haribal took an intense and quick repetition at the time of *matam* and is heard as *hobbol*.

⁸⁹ Bhat is boiled rice; dal is cooked gravy of dried pulses; and ghet is a mixture of different types of vegetables. These three items have been quite common food provided to Matuas in a Mahotsav.

harisobha and *mahotsov* are two distinct ritualistic practices contextualizing a resistant utterance and indulging in rational exercise in Matua religion. One can raise doubts in respect of a rural folks' ability in embarking on rational discussions, but it is to be remembered that Harichand, born in a peasant Chandal family learnt the social and religious mobilization within the rural setting. The Chandals are well aware of caste system and based on the system the practice of discriminations whether economic or social or religious or political inflicted upon them over centuries. The aforementioned rituals are vehicles of promoting the social message.

Chetana Sangeet

The field work for present research has documented *Chetana Sangeet* or the Songs of Conscience. This is comparatively a new musical genre to that of *Hari Sangeet*, but its words, tune, singing, and orchestration are quite new, something very modern, almost on the level of popular movie songs in presentation that have not been thought of earlier. But before a detailed analysis of this musical composition and its relation with resistance is done, a few words have to be said about the role of music and songs in making cultural identity strong.

Songs and music are a distinct social utterance the way political slogan is. Despite some internal differences such as use of varieties of notations, combination of different scales of tunes, different types of expressions, musical instruments, and an orchestration, the social function of both is same, that is delivering a message to the audience in relation to the content it contains. Since it involves an audience, any musical presentation goes beyond the personal and becomes a public asset. Any race, or tribe, or caste does inherit its musical tradition from ancestors. Richard Wallaschek in his *Primitive Music* (1893) studied the tradition of music of most of the primitive groups of people across the world including Bushman and Bongo in Africa,

ancient Sinhalese and Burmese in Asia, and so on. His view could be summarized in the following way: "... however far we might descend in the order of primitive people, we should probably find no race which did not exhibit at least some trace of musical aptitude, and sufficient understanding to turn it to account" (1). And as a medium of communication it imparts "tacit knowledge", and "music may be able to speak to us and for us in ways that other forms of knowledge cannot" (Korczynski 5-6). Whether oral or written, a musical performance of any race, tribe, and caste restore within it a rich resource of knowledge. There are different categories of songs to be found in the whole way of life of a group of people, such as folk songs, devotional songs, non-religious songs, songs of political motivation, of protest and resistance, and so on. In all these categories we gain an authentic knowledge about the makings of their cultural identity. Folk songs such as *Oloi* or *Huloi* songs in *Bastu* ritual and songs in *Hanchra* ritual of Namasudra community, the *Tusu* songs in the said rituals of Kurmi tribe are typical hallmark of the making of their folk belief and cultural identity, in other words, hearing those songs one will come to know that *Bastu*, *Hanchra*, and *Tusu* are being celebrated by the respective groups of people.

The identical character of songs gets properly reflected in songs of protest and resistance too. The 'ragtime', 'jazz; and 'blues' are common examples of how African American people upheld their community identity in a White-dominated social setting. Burton W. Peretti shows how African Americans used jazz around the Harlem Renaissance as a means of community gathering; the "social activism of black communities" found a consolidated force to channelize the black power in a racist American society (92). It seemed quite obvious that to accelerate the mass protest against racial discrimination songs of protest and resistance are a potential tool: "The jazz age signaled the real beginning of popular music's role as a weapon for community

pride and activism among urban blacks” (93). In Indian context, Dalit-bahujan communities adhere close to musical performance to uphold their social solidarity in this Manuvite social structure. Zoe C. Sherinian has done extensive research on Tamil folk music composed and performed by Rev. Dr. James Theophilis Appavoo and its popularity in certain Tamil Dalit community and shown her findings of how marginalized groups of people use it as a potential tool for reasserting their cultural and political identity in her *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology* (2014). To look around in the activism of Dalit-bahujan people across the country in the post-Rohith Vamula urban India, songs of protest and resistance are being composed by hundreds of Ambedkarites; in West Bengal there are notable Ambedkarite singers, such as Uttam Sarkar, Pabitra Biswas, and others who have popularized the songs composed upon the identity of Dalit-bahujan people of West Bengal. In their creative endeavor the greater objective is to ensure “... social emancipation of the poor and oppressed... [and] the process of social identity formation” (xii). *Chetana Sangeet* being a new musical genre carries the same social function.

In the Post-Partition West Bengal, young generations of Namasudra community are facing two specific problems in respect of forming solidarity among them: one, difficulty in bringing together the already displaced people across India; second, lack of political conscience and unification among Dalit-bahujans. Of course there is a major concern in this respect when a united group of people get displaced from their native land being the victims of Partition of Bengal and were forced to settle in far-off land, such as Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Assam, Tripura, West Bengal, Odisha, Chattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh; it seems quite reasonable that the process of unification faces a great challenge in this geographical dispersion. But there is other side of it, that is, whenever one group got settled anywhere they formed a consolidation among

them and in this way became socially united in respective local setting. Although there might not have connectivity with other brethrens who settled in other far-off places, it is by studying that specific group that one can come closer to the idea of their community-based identity and its cultural components they brought along with them.



Fig. 15: The researcher is taking an interview of Mr. Ratan Biswas, an honorary member of Bangiyo Hari-Guruchand Ambedkar Chetana Mancha at the office of the organization at Bagula during fieldwork. (4th week, December, 2019).

Bagula in the district of Nadia is such a locality having more than ninety per cent Namasudra of the entire population. Since the research fieldwork has been conducted at Bagula, let us talk about Bangiya Hari-Guruchand-Ambedkar Chetana Mancha and the emergence of *Chetana Sangeet* and its popularity.

Founded in 2011, Chetana Mancha is a charitable multipurpose cultural forum aiming at promoting the cultural heritage of Dalit-bahujan people of Bengal. The inception of its name includes three great social crusaders, namely Harichand, Guruchand, and Ambedkar. Since its foundation, it nurtures its ideology, that is, *establishing an indigenous cultural narrative through music, dance, drama, literary and intellectual pursuits on the one hand, and destabilizing the cultural narrative of Brahminical hegemony in Bengal on the other*. Spoken in the interview, Mr. Ratan Biswas, an honorary member of the Mancha informs the present researcher that the organization works on three respective ways: educational, cultural, and health. *Chetana Sangeet* is one of the celebrated inventions in their cultural pursuit that formulates the initial process of building a would-be great musical canon.

The birth of *Chetana Sangeet* is simultaneously taken place along with the foundation of the Chetana Mancha. The Bangla word Chetana means conscience, in this sense, it is Songs of Conscience. But what does the conscience mean? Mr. Pabitra Biswas, founder of this musical genre explains the genesis and mechanism of it in the interview taken in his house at Bagula while conducting the fieldwork. According to Mr. Biswas, the young generation of Dalit-bahujan society has to gain knowledge about the heritage of their respective society through the means of cultural initiatives, such as music and literature. It is required more so when the so-called cultural forms, such as literature, music, cinema that have been dominated by Brahmins and other upper castes of Bengal do represent Dalit-bahujans as criminals, savages, and slaves. This systematic mechanism of demonization and dehumanization of indigenous people and their culture has to be countered and demolished. Chetana, that is, conscience can bring such revolutionary spirit among the young generation; and to accelerate this revolutionary spirit, a set of counter cultural mechanism must be laid down in respective Dalit-bahujan settlements. Since it is a digitized

world, cultural activities can be spread out to wider audience beyond an auditorium; it is by singing and performing *Chetana Sangeet* that they can exhibit their own cultural legacy to prove its civilized pattern on the one hand and to spread out the essential social message to their fellow brethren as well. Since it narrates the life and works of great social crusaders born in Dalit-bahujan society, such as Harichand, Guruchand, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Sahuji Maharaj, Periyer Ramasamy, Dr. Ambedkar and others, it has become a powerful weapon in the hand of Dalit-bahujan activists to form a social and political solidarity and a resistant orientation.



Fig. 16. The researcher is taking interview of Mr. Pabitra Biswas (left) during fieldwork at latter's house. The singer is accompanied with tabla (drum) by Mr. Manojit Biswas (right). (4th Week, December, 2019).

There are fifty songs composed so far in this genre, but only six songs have been recorded in the fieldwork. But Mr. Biswas gave a book titled *Chetana Sangeeter Swarolipi* (2016) containing all fifty *Chetana* songs to the present researcher as well.

In the further process of selecting, transcribing, and translating the text of each song, the researcher has translated the full text of four selected songs because they are representative of entire fifty-odd songs in general; another reason to restrict the full-text translation is that the present research being an M. Phil thesis it has its own spatial limitation. In the next step, each song is used as a poem, and then interpreted to bring out essential components, such as metaphor, imagery, and central theme; in this way the concept and treatment of resistance has to be explicated therein.

Since it is mentioned that a documentary has been made out of the raw video clippings of the research fieldwork and already submitted it to the department, the present course of analysis of selected songs will follow the chronological order of the six songs as recorded in the fieldwork and put in the documentary.

The first recorded song starting with “The protest of the marginalized is Sri Lilamrita” which is number 15 in the chronological order of the book of Chetana Sangeet narrates the significant place *Harililamrita* occupies in the life of millions of Matuas. Mr. Pabitra Biswas is both composer and singer of it. The following is the translation of this song by the present researcher:

The protest of the marginalized is *Sri Lilamrita*.

Ignored, deprived, and exploited--- their religion they lost,

Curved out with the flame of fire, Matuas got their Lilamrita.

Crafty and diplomatic, composed by great Tarak⁹⁰,

⁹⁰ Tarak Chandra Sarkar, poet and a close devotee of Harichand and author of Sri Sri Harililamrita.

Hurt of the *dharmo-hin*,⁹¹ gospels of the work force--- all are represented.

Like a swan sipping the milk, the path of love and truth

Will do Matuas all these.

What is lost is restored, so wake up Matuas, wake up,

With the flame of Harichand in this very morning.

Let the *jat-pat*⁹² perish forever with the rhythm of *dankha*,⁹³

Let the world get decorated anew.

Abolish *bedachar*,⁹⁴ hail the humanity

With the protestant voice of *Sri Lilamrita*.

In this song Harililamrita is used as a metaphor, a powerful weapon in the hand of Matuas. Being the foundational text it shows the world of its receivers, the “Ignored, deprived, and exploited” and records a powerful narrative of protestant culture. It celebrates its rebellious genesis as “Curved out with the flame of fire” that burnt the hypocrisy of Brahmins and other upper castes. It is a mine, storage of the heroic tale of sufferers who toppled down the oppressors and liberated themselves from slavery and constructed their religious identity. Documenting the cultural divide between the oppressor and the oppressed, Harililamrita restores what got lost and paves the way for further construction of a distinct identity formation. The people who have been

⁹¹ *Dharmo* (Dharma) means religion and *hin* a suffix in Bangla means ‘having nothing.’ It refers to those who don’t have any right to religion.

⁹² A common colloquial term in Bangla to refer to caste system.

⁹³ The chief musical instrument to Matuas. It is big, circular drum. For pictorial image see Fig. 12.

⁹⁴ It means the rigid, orthodox, and discriminatory rules and customs of Vedic culture.

“dharmo-hin” got their due. But unlike the discriminatory Vedic Brahminism it generates a narrative of “the path of love and truth.” It is compared with a swan that sips only milk out of the mixture of milk and water. This metaphoric usage heightens the implication of the entire song that celebrates Harililamrita. The song compares Harichand to the sun and Harililamrita to the rays that glorify it. The expression “With the flame of Harichand in this very morning” visualizes a new beginning that Harililamrita has brought by dispersing the darkness. In the last few lines there is a call for social unity and greater appeal of harmony: “Let the jat-pat perish forever with the rhythm of dankha,/ Let the world get decorated anew./ Abolish bedachar, hail humanity/ With the protestant voice of Sri Lilamrita.” It therefore emerged as the victorious narrative to thousands of marginalized people. It is the epic of Matuas. This song which is recorded first in the fieldwork thus sets the tone of resistance that has been diversified in the next three songs and in this way epitomizes the entire musical genre of Chetana Sangeet.

The second recorded song “Two greats reside in my mind, one is Harichand and other Guruchand” which is song number 22 in the chronological order of the book glorifies the life and work of the duo in redeeming the life of millions of marginalized group of people. Mr. Pabitra Biswas is both composer and singer of the song. The following is the English translation of this song:

Two greats reside in my mind, one is Harichand and other Guruchand.

In crisis that is limitless, and calamity that is miserable,

Only two boatmen were there,

The savior of downtrodden Sri Harichand and the redeemer of our race Sri Guruchand.

The savior gives us courage to fight back,

Guruchand gave us knowledge,

The resource of hatred and the fantasy of racism--- all are demolished.

Any rights they don't have for thousands of years.

The duo drove away all of darkness by lighting the fire of revolution.

Demolished the wicked authority of the Vedas so as the barrier of division.

Filled up they the empty pot of this race

Who are suffering from ignorance.

Let us come together following the steps of truth, and loving kindness.

In this song Harichand and his son Guruchand are compared to boatmen. With boat being a central imagery, the image of a turbulent sea appears in our mind. We can extend the metaphor by fictionalizing the image of a large number of passengers who caught by the fierce storm right in the middle of the sea. This song is not simply the glorification of this dual figures, rather it brings out a tension lying inside the womb of each word: "In crisis that is limitless, and calamity that is miserable." The depiction of the calamity has been elaborated in this chapter so far; and the historical context of Chandal movement has canonized Harichand and Guruchand. This song comparing them to two boatmen "The savior of downtrodden Sri Harichand and the redeemer of our race Sri Guruchand" justifies the thematic treatment of resistance quintessentially. It recognizes their respective roles "The savior gives us courage to fight back,/ Guruchand gave us knowledge." These two have become strong weapons that have been utilized in the next line

“The resource of hatred and the fantasy of racism--- all are demolished. It is quite clear that ‘hatred’ and ‘racism’ are two back tides pulling the marginalized back to a deep abyss. But the duo stood up and resisted the evil force. They pulled them out of the abyss and “drove all the darkness by lighting the fire of revolution.” The duo carried out a caravan of social justice. The perpetual battle between Aryans and non-Aryans goes back to the time of Rigveda. This song contextualizes this battle by saying they “Demolished the wicked authority of the Vedas”, and brought a new life among the marginalized by ushering in education. It calls for a greater unity among all and foster “Truth and loving kindness.”

The next recorded song beginning with “The whole world is echoing your nectar-like gospel,/ O my lord, I feel blessed.” which is song number 13 in the book universalizing the teachings of Harichand. The composer is Mr. Sushen Biswas and the singer is Mr. Pabitra Biswas. The following is the English translation of this song:

The whole world is echoing your nectar-like gospel,

O my lord, I feel blessed.

To redeem the downtrodden you have come, O great one,

Embraced you all with your loving kindness.

Throwing away the Vedic dictation, you have shown respect to downtrodden,

A new life you have brought for the insulted.

You have shown the right track to thousands of dispersed people,

You have flourished the barren hearts with a new awakening.

The central argument of this song is universalism that goes beyond Chandal-turned-Namasudra community and includes many other marginalized communities' epic tales of struggle to achieve social and political rights. As recorded in Harililamrita, there were thirty-six marginalized communities who got united in the Matua movement. This song is a testimony of this wider religious and social awakening. It glorifies the act and life of Harichand, but not spiritualizes it, since the very ethics of Chetana Sangeet is rooted in social reality. "To redeem the downtrodden you have come, O great one,/ Embraced you all with your loving kindness." Loving kindness occupies a central attraction of Matua religion that remains at the opposite side of Vedic Brahminism, known as Hinduism. "You have shown the right track to thousands of dispersed people,/ You have flourished the barren hearts with a new awakening." The metaphoric usage of marginalized people as barren hearts vivifies the appropriateness of the thematic treatment. The entire song addresses the ethical values Harichand taught to millions of his fellow people. In this sense it deviates from metaphysical aspects and adheres to ethical norms, that is, the acknowledgement of caste system and its inhuman impacts upon a large number of people on the one hand, and the redemption of marginalized people from the imprisonment of caste-based oppression on the other.

The last song recorded in the fieldwork is more metaphoric than previous ones. It is composed and sang by Mr. Biswas. This song, number six in the chronological order begins with "Come and flock around if you want to see,/ The barren land gets filled up with golden crops,/ Harichand, the great farmer cultivated them by shedding his sweats." The following is the English translation of this song:

Come and flock around if you want to see,

The barren land gets filled up with golden crops,

Harichand, the great farmer cultivated them by shedding his sweats.

This land was crowded with weeds of scriptures,

He cultivated it with care by uprooting all weeds.

The land is overburdened with the swinging of the crops,

The barren land gets filled up with golden crops.

But sometimes locusts attack the golden crops,

O friends, come and light up the torch to save the crops.

Oppressions are not yet over, nor is the fierce storm,

The birds of the Vedic garden want to eat these fruits.

Come, all fellow farmers, rush to the field to save our harvests,

The barren land gets filled up with golden crops.

In this song, a couple of metaphors have been used to bring out the symbolic treatment of the central theme. One set of metaphors are representing the entire Dalit-bahujan cultural construction and other sort of metaphors are representing the obstacles it faces. Harichand is compared to a great farmer; the land of marginalized people to a barren, uncultivable land; the Vedic scriptures to weeds and unwanted bushes; Harichand and his entire Matua movement is compared to the process of uprooting the weeds and ploughing this barren land; and the new generations having a social and political awareness as well as nutrition of modern education are

compared to golden crops grown up there. But there are All these metaphoric implications are not meant for exaggeration, rather vivifying the richness of a mass movement and its social, political, and cultural consequences. The visual imagery of a barren land being ploughed by a great farmer Harichand has a pictorial as well as physiological significance. Taking a note from his biography, Harichand was born in a Chandal peasant family. He used to cultivate land and grow crops, an act of scientific merit, indigenous skill, creativity, as well as physical prowess. On the symbolic level, we can visualize a farmer uprooting the weeds and preparing his cultivable land for sowing seed and growing crops to feed his family. When we read “But sometimes the locusts attack the golden crops”, it increases the tensions brewing inside the narrative. The Brahminical hooligans and terrorists who killed Akalabya and Shambuka are compared to locusts targeting the golden crops. The historical outline discussed in the first chapter gives us a fair idea of what does it look like. The song intensifies the tension when it says “Oppressions are not over, nor is the fierce storm,/ The birds of Vedic garden want to eat these crops.” The pictorial representation of two contradictory worlds and the triumphant utterance of the Dalit-bahujans are exquisitely expressed. But it seems there is only one solution, that is, “light up the torch to protect the crops” and “Come, fellow farmers, rush to the field to save our crops.” This call for a social unity is one of the key thoughts in entire Chetana Sangeet and this poem addresses the same.

Although there are fifty songs in the book *Chetana Sangeeter Swrolipi*, the four songs discussed in details in this chapter epitomize the entire musical genre. The selected songs and other Chetana Sangeet that have not been recorded in the fieldwork for the shortage of time but quite accessible since they have been written down including musical notation in this book, two distinct thematic explications can be sorted out in each song: one, celebrating the life and works

of great social crusaders who were born in the marginalized society and later on led a major protestant movement to terminate the oppressive Brahminical hegemony on the one hand, and rescue millions of fellow people from the shackle of it and give them a new identity based on the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity on the other; second, while glorifying them, the songs with the help of metaphoric usages exposes the evil potentiality of Brahminical culture and set an ironical, sarcastic outline of entire cultural hegemony of Brahminism the root of which is of course the Rigveda. It exposes the shallowness and artificiality of Hindu identity and culture on the one hand, and consolidates the indigenous status of marginalized groups who have been tagged as Sudra, ati-Sudra, and Chandal in Manusmriti which is the most venomous text written ever in the human civilization; it is the storage of castiest, racist, and barbaric principles with a surprising power of adaptability irrespective of time and space. To continue the last argument, Chatana Sangeet is a perfect musical performance to fulfill its social and political aim, that is, setting the protestant and resistant tone in the mouth of the mass so that they become aware of oppressive power both political and social on the one hand, and come to know the legacy of great personalities of their own society whose heroic tales have always been suppressed on the other.

As discussed so far, the textual components, such as selected folk rituals, ritualistic practices of Matua religion and Chetana Sangeet are seen to be cultural elements reflecting upon resistance rooted deeper into their ethnic background, in other words, the utterances of their cultural life as a whole rest upon the very ideology of Chandal-turned-Namasudra movement. Both of the phases Harichand era and Guruchand era laid down the very foundation of their intellectual and creative orientation in such a pervasive way that despite their displacement from native East Bengal and forced migration to other country in different decades since 1947 and more intensely after 1971, they carried it along with them and given it a concrete shape in their

new settlement. The post-Partition era therefore has seen the emergence of Chandal-turned-Namasudra community as a unified force the way they were at the time of Harichand and Guruchand. Their cultural heritage with its multilayered texture has to be seen as a faithful reflection of their unified community identity.

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Fourth Chapter

Summing Up

The present chapter sums up the findings that have been decoded and then properly evaluated in the first three chapters of the thesis to justify the research topic. It highlights the results, foregrounds the achievements, and spotlights the limitations of the present research. The following is the proposed outline of the present chapter: first, it sums up the results or findings of the first three chapters and justifies the topic, i. e. cultural heritage of the Namasudra; second, it justifies the research as an essential disciplinary study conducted in the department of English more quintessentially rather than of Social Sciences, such as Social Anthropology; third, it raises serious concerns in relation to the possible threats the selected rituals and songs are facing at the time of Hindutva politics in contemporary time as well as amidst the increasing tendency of cultural domination under the rhetorical utterance of '*baro mase tero parbon*' (Thirteen festivals in twelve months) by Brahmins and other upper castes in West Bengal; fourth, it foregrounds the achievements of the research as well as figures out its limitations; and fifth, it being the very first research on the folk rituals and folk songs of the concerned community, it paves the way for further researches in this field in future.

West Bengal being an integral part of erstwhile undivided Bengal carries a legacy of two millennium-old historical autonomy beginning with Nanda dynasty ruling the eastern part around 4th century B. C. E. Its ethnic population comprises of aboriginal tribes, many non-Aryan ethnic communities, Aryans or Hindus; Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians. Chandal-turned-Namasudras have been living around the lower Gangetic plain long before the Aryan invasion taken place in the North in the second millennium B. C. E. and subsequent process of

Aryanization or Brahminization of Bengal around late 12th century C. E. in the Sena dynasty in proper. They have shown a strong, adamant, and resistant attitude to the engulfing process of Aryanization or Brahminization which later on came to be known since Islamic period as Hinduization. Idolatry, polytheism, Brahminical priesthood, purity of caste identity, immutable and imperishable caste system and based on the system a presumed everlasting system of discrimination--- all these seem to be the identical marks of Hindu culture at large. But it is shown in the second chapter of the thesis that folk rituals such as *Garshi* celebrated during the last and first day of the Bangla month Ashwin and Kartika; *Bastu* celebrated on the last day of the Bangla month Poush; and *Hanchra* celebrated on the last day of the Bangla month Phalgun--- all are bearers of their century-old indigenous rituals dedicated to Nature worship or Naturism as Emile Durkheim distinguishes them that does not under any circumstances include idolatry, priesthood (exclusively male-dominated), use of holy Ganga water, Sanskrit hymns, scriptural norms and other forms of ritualistic practices which are so characteristic of Vedic culture. The use of a small branch of Jibli tree or of a ber tree, use of different types of flowers available only around rural wetland and cultivable land, a clay-made crocodile and singing songs while celebrating the respective rituals are very peculiar to only non-Aryan, indigenous groups of people who always rely upon Nature as the chief source of their food, of shelter, and of a secure means of earning. Besides, orality occupies the central place in all of their rituals. The extent of their oral culture is assumed to be as old as the community itself. The periodization of their cultural history is quite unspecific until the British scholars introduced the practice of writing down history following specific date, era, dynasty, as well as particular political incidents. The specific period names, such as Delhi Sultanet, Colonial period are marked with definite political characteristics. Following the specific political characteristics the Post-Partition era is the most

decisive mark in the twentieth century history of Indian subcontinent. To locate the Chandal-turned-Namasudras in the Post-Partition era, we see two parallel sides, one living in Bangladesh (since they decided so) and the other living scattered almost all over the Eastern part of India. As discussed elaborately in previous chapters, the refugee identity of those who migrated to India since 1947, but more thickly since 1971 carried along with them those traditional rituals and songs. Wherever they settled, whether in rural locations surrounded with ponds, wetland, cultivable land (as the fieldwork for this research has been conducted) or in slums beside the railway tracks in urban and semi-urban locations, they have tried their best to revive and celebrate those rituals following calendrical status. Memory and imitation which are quintessential to young members of the community to learn all songs sung by the elders is seen in the case of *Huloi* or *Oloi* songs. The young boys participate in this ritualized singing and learn the words, tunes, as well as notations by hearing the singing from the elders. This oral transmission from older to younger ensures the future recipients of their traditional rituals to carry out in years to come. It is seen that young girls see their mothers and aunts celebrating *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra* following all sorts of customs that they learnt from their mothers and aunts. It cements up a cultural lineage from old generation to mature generation, from mature generation to young generation.

Their religious belief on the other hand has become stronger since Partition. It was felt by them that loosening the unified religious identity would surely become a vulnerable situation for them to get separated from their fellow brethren in this new land. It was evident more typically among the second generation because the first generation exhausted almost all of their energy to re-build their shelter again in this alien land. The foundation and emergence of Matua Mahshangha nearby Thakur Nagar railway station at Bangaon, North 24 Pargana came into

being as full-fledged religious head quarter for Matuas of India since as late as 1980s, almost two decades after the newly migrated people found this piece of land as their possible refugee colony. It took time, but once it emerged as the most powerful centre of Matua culture in India, the name Thakur Nagar became the symbol of their unity as well as of pride. The religious rituals related to Matuaism that have already been shown to be the instrument of protest and resistance help them strengthen their religious and cultural unity and its further development.

Being a newly established cultural forum, Bangiya Hari-Guruchand Ambedkar Chetana Mancha has undertaken active initiatives in the field of education, cultural activities, and health care throughout the year to dispatch the social responsibility they feel to be needed to fulfill the ambitions of Harichand, Guruchand, and Dr. Ambedkar. But it does another function, that is, to strengthen the bond among the fellow brethren of Bagula and its adjacent places as well as of other far-off places. Chetana Sangeet being a new musical genre promotes knowledge about the legacy of great personalities through performance to the young generations and as it is recorded in the interview, it has become quite popular in many other places too. This has diversified the narrative of their cultural heritage through sophisticated medium of singing and performing.

On the issue of taking up a research on rituals and songs collected through ethnographic fieldwork in the department of English Studies the question of its validity as well as possible impact cannot be overlooked. It is more so when a comparison is made with the traditional research programs undertaken in English departments. It is seen that the primary texts of most of the researches are literary texts whether Western or Indian, whether original English or in English translation. But if we put aside purely literary texts, an interdisciplinary approach is quite visible in recent times. The inclusion of cinema and documentaries, comics and cartoons, video games and science fictions in research programs do highlight the paradigm shift taking place in

English departments across universities. It is quite cognitive to acknowledge that the inclusion of all these discourses has increased the scope and opportunity of pursuing research to young scholars on the one hand and has diversified the discursive practice of English department on the other hand. Following this logic, the present research having recordings of live performances of rituals and songs as its primary texts does justify its inclusivity in the diverse discursive practices of English department. The analytical and interpretative study of the selected rituals and songs of a marginal community's cultural heritage and its central argument, that is, *the re-assertion and re-appropriation of a Dalit-bahujan community's cultural heritage* that is no longer inferior to any culturally dominant caste do justify the place of present research project in English department.

The next issue to be discussed is very crucial, that is, possible threats the selected rituals and songs are facing in contemporary time. The aged members of the community expressed some concern in respect of growing indifference and ignorance the young generation of their community is showing to their traditional rituals and songs. According to the community members, their ignorance comes from two major sources: one, exhausting the time through indulging in 'smart phone culture, predominantly in the social networking sites'; second, discovering fun and entertainment in different forms of popular culture, such as rock music, disco, and filmic culture. Besides, there are other signs of threats thickening around, such as increasing dominance of idolatry in West Bengal; educated families' migration to town and growing trend of favoring English-medium schooling among them; and increasing onslaught of Hindutva political culture among Chandal-turned-Namasudras. The folk rituals represent a subtle form of Nature worship. The rich imagination and creative spirit of the rural folk around a branch of a Jibli tree, a clay-made crocodile, and a small branch of a ber tree is bearer of their

inextricable, inseparable bond with nature as if a maternal nourishment. The increasing number of idolatry festivals, whether Durga, Kali, and Saraswati throughout the year and its publicity through electronic media and print media are inimical to their folk culture. Since Chandal-turned-Namasudras are primarily agrarian, with the spread of education among them (it is the result of Guruchand's education reform and Dr. Ambedkar's socialist, utilitarian political decision-making) the educated families are migrating to urban locality for getting better access to resources of urban culture, English-medium schooling for the new generation in particular. This migration creates a vacuum between *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra*-celebrated rural environment and a new, urban environment. The new generation of those migrated families no longer relates all these folk rituals celebrated by their rural brethren with their urban life style. A missing link separates them; the traditional and the modern seem to be irreconcilable in future. Another threat is looming large in contemporary political ambience, that is, the radicalization of political narrative by Right-wing political establishment in India and West Bengal. The rise of RSS-inspired BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) initiates the process of neo-Hinduiation, in other words, circulating a dominant religio-political narrative that India is predominantly a Hindu nation. This imposes two types of threats upon Chandal-turned-Namasudras. First, they have been forcefully identified as Hindu; and second, they have been forced to believe that Muslims are their enemies. These threats, the last one in particular is potential enough to radicalize the simple, innocent rural folk. If it capitalizes on its first narrative, their traditional folk culture might have been swallowed by the dominant Brahminical culture.

The present research has husked off the grain out of the chaff to exhibit its achievement. Unlike the popular notion projected by Brahminical scriptures and literary texts that Dalit-bahujans are criminals, anti-socials, as well as fit to become the eternal slaves in the household

of Brahmins and upper castes (this aspect of Brahminical representation of Dalit life has already been discussed in the first and third chapter in details), the present research has brought out new aspects of the community culture of Chandal-turned-Namasudras who have always been despised, criminalized, and demonized by the Brahmins of Bengal. Their folk rituals, folk songs, Matua identity, and Chetana Sangeet are some outstanding marks of cultural sophistication. These findings through the painstakingly done research are the achievements. But it is not inimical to limitations, in other words, since the fieldwork for the research has been conducted in some respective rural localities in the district of Nadia, West Bengal, it requires a cross examination with the findings of the fieldwork to be done in other localities of the same district as well as in other districts of West Bengal, such as North 24 Pargana, South 24 Pargane, Malda, Murshidabad and others. But what is found in the conversations and interviews of the community members of the respective localities as well as of some scholars that the celebration of *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra* are quite common among Chandal-turned-Namasudras who have had East Bengal as their native land. The people of selected localities covered in the fieldwork have had their ancestral home in erstwhile East Bengal. But as stated earlier, it requires a cross examination to come to a general consensus that the folk rituals and folk songs are quite universal among them. What can be said at last is that the findings of the present research fieldwork are some sort of microcosmic representation of a macrocosmic cultural heritage of the Chandal-turned-Namasudra community.

The last point to be discussed is a further possibility this research is opening up to other would-be researchers. Folk rituals such *Garshi*, *Bastu*, and *Hanchra*, ritualistic practices of Matua religion and the growing popularity of Chetana Sangeet--- all these are contributors to shaping their community culture. But there are many other rituals existing among them that have

not been covered up in the fieldwork because of the time constraint in the M.Phil program. Further research in this field therefore can bring out a many-sided, richly-layered cultural narrative of a marginalized community of West Bengal.

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